Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Dissertation

# The Sympathetic Imagination in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee

*Empathy and Mirror Neurons in Literature*

zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades

doctor philosophiae

(Dr. phil.)

Kultur-, Sozial- und Bildungswissenschaftliche Fakultät

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Datum der Einreichung: 06.10.2014

Datum der Promotion: 17.03.2015

## Abstract: The Sympathetic Imagination in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee - *Empathy and Mirror Neurons in Literature*

The following study attempts a comprehensive evaluation of how the sympathetic imagination evolves in the works of J.M. Coetzee. The underlying assumption is that the way Coetzee employs his sympathetic imagination in his fiction enhances the reader's empathetic capabilities. A starting point for the central categories of analysis and the close readings of his novels will be a brief exploration of the neuronal basis of empathy as discussed in the context of the discovery of and continuously extending research on mirror neurons as the neurological basis for empathy. Shared attention and perspective-taking constitute the focus of neuroscientific discussions of the connection between empathy and mirror neurons. A close look at Coetzee's fiction will reveal comparable mechanisms in literary representation.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I thank J.M. Coetzee for providing me with a literature that has inspired me to engage with it empathetically, giving me the opportunity to apply and refine my sympathetic imagination; I also thank Coetzee for wishing me "Good Luck" for my PhD when signing my copy of *Summertime* after a public reading at York University in 2011. I thank Eike Kronshage for generously providing me with a basic stock of Coetzee books. I am profoundly grateful for the unwavering support of my supervisor, Flora Veit-Wild, who has provided counsel and critical input throughout this project – and before and beyond it. Thanks go also to my second supervisor Carrol Clarkson, whose hospitality paved the way for my research in Cape Town. As for travel funding, I am indebted to the patient and well-informed support of Frau Hans of the International Office of the Humboldt University Berlin. Mike Marais was so kind to welcome me at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, and discuss my research over a beer at the Parrot. I thank Clodagh Springer in Grahamstown for generously and without hesitation hosting me – at that point a stranger; Arthur Rose was so kind to establish the contact via Michael Springer. I will not forget the amazing support I received at NELM, Grahamstown, specifically by Andrew Martin – thank you. Another prime example of hospitality was set by Shaun Viljoen, who hosted me in Cape Town and has ever since been a much-appreciated friend and mentor. My thanks also go out to late John Kannemeyer, who was so kind to meet me for an interview in Stellenbosch shortly before the publication of his biography on Coetzee. I further wish to thank Brendan Nicholls, Sam Durrant, David Atwell, Hermann Wittenberg, Derek Attridge and Laura Otis for helpful advice and pointers. And this study would have not been possible without the kind support of co-students such as Reshma Jagerath, Tuleka Prah, Julius Heinicke, Arthur Rose, Donald Powers, Eckart Smuts, Kai Wiegandt, and many more. The literary colloquium at the Department of African Studies has been a valuable forum for presenting and discussing my ideas. I also thank my friend Ludiwine Courant for continuous logistical and motivational support. Euphemia von Kalern zu Lanzenheim kindly assisted in the final printing and delivery of my thesis. Also, I thank Rose Uiso for her infinite patience with my work and the repeatedly extended deadlines; being able to return to being with her after having completed this study has been an invaluable source of happiness. Last, but not least, I thank my parents who always and forever provide their support and love.

# ABBREVIATIONS

1974 *Dusklands* = DL

1977 *In the Heart of the Country* = HOC

1980 *Waiting for the Barbarians* = WFB

1983 *Life & Times of Michael K* = MK

1986 *Foe* = FOE

1990 *Age of Iron* = AOI

1992 *Doubling the Point* = DP

1993 *The Master of Petersburg* = MOP

1998 *Boyhood* = BH

1999 *The Lives of Animals* = LOA

2001 *Youth* = Y

2003 *Disgrace* = D

2003 *Elizabeth Costello* = EC

2003 *"He and His Man"* = HHM

2004 *"As a Woman Grows Older"* = WGO

2005 *Slow Man* = SM

2007 *Diary of a Bad Year* = DOA

2009 *Summertime* = ST

2012 *The Childhood of Jesus* = CJ

1988 *White Writing* = WW

1996 *Giving Offense* = GO

2002 *Stranger Shores* = *Stranger Shores*

2007 *Inner Workings* = IW

## Outline

# 1. It is difficult not to sympathize...

In the epigraph of his first novel, *Dusklands*, published in 1974, J.M. Coetzee quotes US war strategist Hermann Kahn: "Obviously it is difficult not to sympathize [...]." In my readings of Coetzee's fictions, my imagination could not help but respond in a sympathetic fashion to the characters presented; in other words: it was impossible not to sympathize. In *The Lives of Animals* Elizabeth Costello conceptualizes an "ethical imperative to sympathise with the embodied experiences of other beings," as the critic Kate McInturff has noted (McInturff 2007: 5).

The remainder of Kahn's quote runs a sinister twist, for his sympathies are directed at US-American cinema audiences' "horror and disgust" upon witnessing the exhilaration of pilots dropping bombs on Vietnam. Kahn continues with a thought about the selection of necessarily ruthless soldiers who are not prone to become "excessively depressed or guilt-ridden" after the deed. While Kahn acknowledges the horrors of warfare, his sympathies are not extended to the victims of the war but rather to the American audiences witnessing the war atrocities on screen. Ironically complicating the constellation of perpetrator, victim and witness, Coetzee sets the tone for the following novella that explores the mind of Eugene Dawn, a strategist of psychological warfare, exposing how the meditated violence turns against him and estranges him from all others.

If we take up the impulse of this opening and give in to the sympathy Coetzee awakens for all his characters, we will find out that the type of literature Coetzee writes is primed for this effect by its unparalleled depth of introspection into the mindspaces of others.

Follow me on a tour through all of Coetzee's novels, exploring how the sympathetic imagination is enacted and how processes of empathy are evoked in the characters, the reader, and ultimately the author himself. In the early novels, published between 1974 and 1983, the reader's sympathetic imagination is confronted with monologic characters who fail to build meaningful relationships. From *Foe* (1986) onwards, the cast is expanded and the main protagonists, who still constitute the epicentre of the narratives, encounter a variety of other characters. These serve as catalysts for the emotional development of the protagonists, and we as readers partake in their perspectives, guided by the narrative strategies employed by Coetzee.[1] With *Age of Iron* (1990) and *The Master of Petersburg* (1993) the tone becomes more personal, and the setting and themes are closer to Coetzee's own biography, such as the

[1] See also Heister 2008.

themes of parenthood and loss of a child, as well as the complicated relation to South Africa as a home country. This trend is continued with the autobiographical fictions *Boyhood* (1998), *Youth* (2001), and *Summertime* (2009), only now Coetzee redirects his attention to his childhood self, himself as a young man, and finally his dead self as remembered by others. At this point the sympathetic imagination has reached a high degree of complexity and maturity, suited to the task of thorough self-inspection refracted in literature.

In both *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) Coetzee experiments with a format that allows him to present a wide range of personal opinions underscored by a narrative that relegates responsibility to the proxy characters Costello and Señor C. While in *Elizabeth Costello* opinions are embedded in the narrative, presented as lectures held by Costello, in *Diary of a Bad Year* Coetzee separates opinions and narrative by using a split-page format, preparing the ground for the polyphonic narration of *Summertime*. In the novels *Disgrace* (2003) and *Slow Man* (2005) Coetzee expertly portrays how the aging men David Lurie and Paul Rayment learn to open up to others, while simultaneously showcasing their limitations. *The Childhood of Jesus* (2012) finally shows a return to a more allegorical setting, in which the sympathetic imagination seems to run dry in the face of the benevolent but impartial goodwill of the people.

## 1.1 Sympathetic Imagination, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons

In *The Lives of Animals* (1999) Coetzee has Elizabeth Costello air her opinions on animal ethics. Costello proposes a particular form of sympathetic engagement with animals, claiming that "there are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination." (EC 79, also LOA 35) Costello stresses the importance of an embodied representation of the animal other for the sympathetic imagination to be invoked by poetry. What she exactly means by sympathetic imagination, she doesn't say, it can only be inferred from the text. I take sympathetic imagination to be a central idea in the work of Coetzee, with embodiment as a complementary concept.

The sympathetic imagination is basically a literary tool for engaging with the other. In the first instance, the author employs it in the creation of his characters, who potentially employ it in their encounters with textual others, while the reader employs it in his experience of these characters. The sympathetic imagination represents a benevolent and hospitable attitude, a state of mind prepared and willing to engage with otherness. Sympathy is arrived at consciously, we decide to be sympathetic – or not. In the process of engaging with the other

empathy can be triggered, the emotional basis for the sympathetic imagination to become effective. Empathy is a subconscious reflex to the actions we perceive; we cannot control it – just imagine seeing a person suffering an accident and experiencing severe pain; our body will most likely respond, be it with a jerk or a tingling sensation.[2]

The cognitive basis for empathy is the activity of mirror neurons which enables us to read the emotions of others.[3] As readers we co-inhabit the perspectives of Coetzee's "paper beings". Following the cue of Fritz Breithaupt's study *Kulturen der Empathie* (2009) and his concept of *narrative empathy*, I concentrate on the conflicts acted out in Coetzee's novels. On the textual level, I examine character constellations of enacted conflicts; on a extra-textual level the author is acting out a conflict with himself through his texts, into which he has inscribed himself, sometimes more, sometimes less visibly – the overarching argument being that Coetzee ultimately applies the sympathetic imagination to his earlier selves and thereby manages to reach out to his current self empathetically.

In his expansive biography, *JM Coetzee - A Life in Writing* (2012), John Kannemeyer touches on the subject of sympathy and empathy several times. He analyses a scene of *Boyhood* where young John and some boys have ice cream on the occasion of his birthday. Through the shop window, coloured children observe their pleasure (and empathetically take part in it). The boy John feels the children outside are spoiling his occasion and ponders whether to chase them off. The following comment, however, lays bare how racial segregation affects him emotionally, regardless of or especially due to his social position: "Whatever happens, whether they are chased away or not, it is too late, his heart is already hurt." (BH 73) Kannemeyer, who reads *Boyhood* quite literally as autobiography, comments: "He felt empathy with these children who did not have the same privileges." (Kannemeyer 2012: 56) The portrayed selfishness of the boy John (his fun was spoilt) coexists with a sympathetic attitude (the coloured boys are permanently excluded from the same fun). Kannemeyer relates this ambivalence to Coetzee's social situation, illustrating his sympathetic and empathetic sensibilities with an anecdote:

> The fact that John was younger than his classmates hampered his social development. When confronted with a problem, physical or intellectual, his instinct was to bottle up his emotions. He was an outsider who often did not share in the fun and games of his classmates. In the college annual of 1956, where each of the matrics is summed up in a single phrase, John is characterised by the declaration "I refuse to Rock and Roll." Apart from the social marginalisation John experienced on account of his reserved nature, there was a political marginalisation stemming from the Coetzees' support of the United Party,

[2] The differentiation of sympathy and empathy will be revisited several times over the course of the introduction. For a detailed discussion see also Chismar 1988.
[3] See the excellent discussion of mirror neurons as a basis for empathy in Preston/de Waal 2002.

> though this would not have been an issue at St. Joseph's. John's undemonstrative manner did not preclude an early empathy with his fellow-beings. Nic Stathakis remembered him in 2008 as a youth with a strong sympathy with others, especially with the underprivileged:
> "One small example is fixed in my memory. In Cape Town in the Fifties the suburban trains going down the peninsula to the suburbs would stand at Cape Town station with the whites-only section at the buffer or concourse end. The non-white coaches were way down at the end of the platform. While still schoolboys John once told me that one of the saddest things he had seen was a large black woman weighed down with shopping bags sweatily running/shuffling down the platform to get to the non-white section in time, the departure whistle already having been blown. Entering the first coach (whites only) and walking through the train as would be done in any normal country, was out of the question." (Kannemeyer 2012: 66)

The anecdote illustrates the complex interplay of sympathy, empathy and embodiment. The emphasis on the physical properties of the black woman indicates embodiment, evoking empathy in the youth, in compliance with his general sympathetic attitude towards the suffering of underprivileged people.

## 1.2 The Sympathetic Imagination in *Elizabeth Costello* (1997) and *The Lives of Animals* (1999)

In his novels Coetzee explores the frontiers of literary representation and discourse, engaging the reader to reflect on issues as varied as censorship, torture, poetics, reciprocity, authenticity, truth, confession, ethics, animal rights, and encounters with others. Along with his fictions Coetzee published various academic inquiries into above-named issues – which then again are reflected in his fictional work; a large number of essays is dedicated to the work of a variety of other writers.[4] An autobiographical turn in his work, dating back to the publication of the essay and interview volume *Doubling the Point* in 1992, the novel *Age of Iron* in 1990 and the pseudo-biographic novel *The Master of Petersburg* in 1993, ultimately resulted in the publication of his trilogy of autobiographical fictions: *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Summertime* (2009). In his later work Coetzee explores the theoretical and ethical implications of his own writing more deeply and explicitly. The essay volume *The Lives of Animals* (1999)[5] and the subsequent novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), which builds on two chapters already included in *Lives of Animals* and expands these by six additional lessons, which (except for the final two) Coetzee had presented as guest lectures at various universities.[6] For these occasions Coetzee created the persona Elizabeth Costello, an aging

[4] See in particular *Stranger Shores* (2001) and *Inner Workings* (2007).
[5] *The Lives of Animals* starts off with Coetzee's two essays "The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and the Animals," followed by responses by a variety of scholars from different disciplines.
[6] For a comprehensive account of the academic settings where Coetzee presented these lectures see Attridge 2004a.

Australian fiction writer, whose public lectures Coetzee relates as fictional accounts – a mirror device allowing for a distance between author and the positions stated by Costello. Since Elizabeth Costello is a proxy character created by J.M. Coetzee, it remains uncertain in how far Coetzee himself would subscribe to Costello's beliefs and propositions. However, I explore the sympathetic imagination as presented by Costello – meaning I might be taking her more seriously than Coetzee himself would. In my reading, these two central lectures have the qualities of a manifesto.[7] The two lessons most relevant to my discourse are "The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and the Animals," both of them discussing ethics of human-animal relations in the light of the sympathetic imagination.[8]

In the first of Coetzee's two lecture-essays, "The Philosophers and the Animals," Costello discusses in *her* lecture how philosophy has provided the ideological framework of the principal dichotomy between human beings and animals which allows the use – or rather abuse – of animals for human consumption and experimental procedures. Costello evokes the image of the slaughterhouse and rejects the underlying reasoning on the grounds that "reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought" (LOA 21), echoing the epistemological assumptions of Kant.[9] Accordingly, Costello opposes the rationalist discourse of the philosophers and sets against it the sensation of life, shared by humans and animals:

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[7] Paola Splendore is more careful in her formulation:

> Thus, the novel cannot be considered a manifesto, in which Coetzee discusses his poetics under false pretences; it is rather the space of a prolonged reflection on questions which have always engaged Coetzee: the form of the novel, the role of the arts in Africa, the freedom of artists, the humanity of animals, the pact between ethics and aesthetics. Though occasionally Costello expresses Coetzee's ideas, becoming almost his female 'embodiment', a sort of 'portrait of the artist as an old lady', she in fact represents a dramatization of the author-function, specifically that of a white female writer, form an ex-Commonwealth country, Australia. (Splendore 2004: 147)

Jeff McMahan puts it more simply: "It is, however, unimportant whether the views expressed in the essays within the novel are Coetzee's own. They are the views of a great many people. They are the views, in particular, of people of a certain familiar type, people generally on the political left who are earnest, decent, and humane." (McMahan 2010: 91) Michael Bell takes a similar stance:

> Without collapsing author into character, one could take as a significant clue Lurie's remark "Excuse me for talking this way. I am trying to be frank." For it would seem that Coetzee's own frankness is exercised in the mode of the open secret, constantly made available through, and yet significantly bracketed as, literature. In Coetzee, the literary as such proves over and again to be the radically discomforting, and yet indispensable category for a certain kind of truth telling. (Bell 2007: 218)

For a more comprehensive discussion on Coetzee/Costello see Sevry 2000, Splendore 2004, Poyner 2006, Walton 2008, Sanders 2009, Dancygier 2010.

[8] First presented as *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* at Princeton University in 1997.

[9] Roux simply states: "Her [Costello's] advocacy of literature over philosophy can be captured by two terms: embodiment and sympathetic imagination." (Roux 2005: 25) An interesting argument is offered by Laurence Wright, drawing on the work of Arthur Schopenhauer, proposing the possibility of "transcendental insight" and the existence of a "cognitive escape-hatch" as opposed to Kantian limitation of our perceptual framework (Wright 2008: 5).

> To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being – not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation – a heavily affective sensation – of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. This fullness contrasts starkly with Descartes' key state, which has an empty feel to it: the feel of a pea rattling around in a shell. (LOA 33)

Costello aims to promote the empathetic faculties of human beings, which allow us to engage with animals in a significant and sympathetic way. She urges everybody to feel for others – that is, to experience sympathy for others – and to feel with and like others; that is, to experience empathy for them. In Sanford Budick's words, "it's the reversal and reciprocity of a chiastic frame of mind that enables the novelist and reader alike to enter into the being of a fictional character in a relationship of intersubjectivity." (Budick 1996: 243) A sympathetic imagination of this sort," continues Budick, "should enable one all the more to enter into the existence of non-human being." (Budick 1996: 243) The sympathetic imagination paves the way for an empathetic engagement with others. In an old-fashioned way, Costello locates this potential in the human chest: "The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another." (LOA 34; original italics) Costello calls on her audience to open their hearts and make room for the empathy that lies within. In yet another rebuttal of hegemonic philosophical traditions, she goes on:

> Despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. *There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination*. […] If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (LOA 35, emphasis added)

At no point does Costello clearly define what she understands the sympathetic imagination to be, but her lucid comments on Kafka's Red Peter, relating this parable to the historical story of Wolfgang Köhler's Sultan, as well as the horror she expresses at factory farming and industrial-scale slaughterhouses, suggest it to be, at the very least, a means of opening up to a more positive engagement with the other, in this case the primate Sultan. Unlike Wolfgang Köhler, Franz Kafka made extensive use of his sympathetic imagination in creating Red Peter, encouraging the readers to extend their empathy to the animal world. In *The Lives of Animals* Coetzee expands Kafka's line of thought in a meta-discourse on fiction exploring our perception of animals. Some of Coetzee fictions – earlier and later – extend the range of others encountered by the main character, including both human and nonhuman animals. These encounters with otherness in all their variety test the achievements, failures, and limitations of the sympathetic imagination while simultaneously challenging the reader's own sympathetic imagination.

In Coetzee's second lecture-essay, "The Poets and the Animals," Costello conducts a poetry workshop for the (also fictional) Department of English at Appleton College and gives an account of two (actually existent) poetic engagements: firstly in Rilke's poem "The Panther," and then in Hughes' poems "The Jaguar" and "Second Glance at a Jaguar."[10] More in favour of Hughes, she compliments the way his poems "ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving [as the currents of life move within it], to inhabit that body" and claims them to be the "record of an engagement with him [the jaguar]." (LOA 51) In her account of Hughes' particular encouragement to inhabit the jaguar's body, Costello emphasizes the role the body in the evocation of the jaguar's "being-in-the-world," again a technique mirrored by Coetzee, who embodies his characters with physical presence and, by doing so, with the joy and distress that come with inhabiting a body. This also applies to *Lives of Animals* and to *Elizabeth Costello*, but also, and perhaps even more notably so, to earlier characters such as Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K*, the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*.[11] The notion of embodiment described by Costello forms the basis for a process of identification with the other that allows the sympathetic imagination to engage with it fully. The congruence of physical being – both in joy and suffering – constitutes a fundamental similarity between all humans and animals. In poetry – and in literature more broadly conceived – this potential for congruence can draw us into a moment or much more of sharing the body of the other and perhaps also of discovering or rediscovering the joy of being ourselves embodied beings:

> By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals –by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves. When we read the jaguar poem, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us. (LOA 53)

The notion of embodiment is a prerequisite for the author's application of his sympathetic imagination to be effective in promoting empathy. The physical other comes with a consciousness of its own. In a derogatory note on the logics of behavioural sciences Costello claims: "We understand by immersing ourselves and our intelligence in complexity." (LOA 62) Her lecture on the lives of animals, in which she discusses the work of primatologist Wolfgang Köhler, gives an example of what such an understanding might look like and how it

[10] For a more extensive discussion (including a reprinting of the poems discussed) see Mulhall 2009: 110-121. Lawrence Wright comments on Coetzee's choice of poets, relating them to philosophical discourses contested and embraced by Costello: "Roughly speaking, the comparison of Rilke and Hughes represents a contrast between a neo-Kantian epistemology, exemplified by Rilke, and the particular post-Kantian epistemology espoused by Schopenhauer, and borrowed by Hughes." (Wright 2008: 3)

[11] For an in-depth exploration of Coetzee's use of the body see Hughes 2007.

might work. She imagines herself into the position of the chimpanzee called Sultan under Köhler's experimental tutelage. Köhler supplies food to Sultan with obstacles that require Sultan to figure out how to reach the food. Costello imagines Sultan asking himself what he might have done to deserve such cruel treatment. One might question the acumen of Costello's arguments against philosophical reasoning, just as one might dismiss or reject the ethical stance she takes on behalf of the nonhuman animals.[12] But Coetzee endows her with the passionate conviction of a sentient being who doesn't claim to hold a greater truth, and who instead follows her intuition and her experience, both of which lead her to believe that the sympathetic imagination only needs to be awakened in order to make available an empathetic bond with the other. Costello concedes that her lecture lacks rational appeal and philosophical perspicacity, but supplements such deficit by modestly referring her audience to the imaginative realms of more capable poets:

> If I do not convince you, that is because my words, here, lack the power to bring home to you the wholeness, the unabstracted, unintellectual nature, of that animal being. That is why I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language; and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner. (LOA 65)

Costello here provides a clue as to what the sympathetic imagination might be, namely a tool of the poet/writer to "bring home" to the reader the "unabstracted, unintellectual nature" of another, in this case an animal being. Her alternative suggestion of visiting an abattoir in order to experience the terror of the animals suggests that the poets' representations might be able to achieve a similar effect on the reader as the shocking reality of industrialized death; that is, if the reader allows himself to "be moved" by the poets. Through the sympathetic imagination both author and reader gain access to the minds and bodies of others in the form of a positive engagement, which then potentially leads to an empathy effect.

## 1.3 Criticism on the Sympathetic Imagination

Historically, the concept of the sympathetic imagination can be traced back to its first appearance in the moral philosophy of Adam Smith in his "Theory of Moral Sentiments" (1759).[13] Smith opens his study by proposing that all humans are subject to feeling pity or compassion:

> How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him,

[12] I widely support Costello's claims. See also McKay 2010 or Tremaine 2003. For an overview of current trends in the discussion of animal rights see Cavell et al. 2008. For an anthropologist's response see Fuentes 2006.
[13] Cf. Brady 2011.

> though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. (Smith 1971 [1759]: 1-2)

In Smith's understanding, compassion and pity are qualifiers of sympathy. The logic of mirroring others is implied in Smith's argument, when he states what part the imagination has in engaging with others:

> As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is on the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination, we place ourselves in his situation [...]. (Smith 1971: 2)

Smith's notion of a sympathetic imagination was picked up by the poets of English Romanticism, most prominently by the poet John Keats and the critic William Hazlitt. A strong faith in the human imagination was pitted against the rationalism promoted by the Enlightenment – comparable to the efforts of Elizabeth Costello. The poets William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron and William Blake can be seen as similarly disposed towards favouring the imagination over rationality. The essayist William Hazlitt draws on and responds to Edmund Burke, outlining how the imagination might be involved in our reception of literature and how it might serve to promote ethical behaviour. In the context of discussing Keats' poetry, Hazlitt formulates the concept of negative capabilities (imagining that which we are not), which complements the concept of the sympathetic imagination, which preferably runs on similarity but is ideally challenged to imaginatively move beyond similarity.[14]

As vast and diverse the Coetzee industry is today, a large part of the criticism has been preoccupied with following the traces of philosophical discourses Coetzee has imbibed his fictions with. The philosophies and ethics of Hegel, Schopenhauer (see Laurence Wright), Nietzsche, Derrida (see Derek Attridge), Levinas (see Mike Marais), Blanchot (see Sam Durrant), Lacan (see Michaela Canepari-Labib), Foucault and more have been originally and fruitfully linked and/or applied to Coetzee's novels.[15] Although encounters with the other (and the reader's experience of these encounters) have featured prominently in some criticism, most expansively in Attridge's two-prong approach in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*

[14] For an expansive discussion of concepts of the imagination prevalent in English Romanticism see Whale 2000.
[15] For an extensive overview of criticism on Coetzee see López 2011: 3-43; also: Clarkson 2011, Head 2009, De Jong 2005, Kossew 1998. For a more comprehensive study of the theoretical discourses Coetzee is linked to see Boehmer et al. 2009.

(2004) and *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), the concept of the sympathetic imagination, however, has so far received little specific attention. If it has, it cropped up in combination with discussions of animal ethics, as in Anton Leist and Peter Singer's expansive and compelling essay collection *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics* (2010) or in Wendy Woodward's imaginative response to Coetzee's Costello fictions, *The Animal Gaze – Animal Subjectivities in Southern African Narratives* (2008). These works draw more on Elizabeth Costello's general stance and attitude than on her fundamental proposition of a limitless sympathetic imagination. Most notably Sam Durrant and Mike Marais have discussed the sympathetic imagination, though both remain carefully sceptic of Costello's claims, while sensing the potential of her approach. Using Levinas (the other's face; *Antlitz*) and Derrida (hospitality), Durrant and Marais argue that Coetzee repeatedly sets up the stage for acts of the sympathetic imagination, but in the act shows how limited its scope actually is – both Marais and Durrant refer to the frustration experienced with self-other encounters in Coetzee's fictions.[16] My readings will in parts confirm their suspicions, but at the same time tease out how the staging of the sympathetic imagination combined with empathetic engagement might be more consequential.

Geoffrey Baker's excellent essay "The Limits of Sympathy: J.M. Coetzee's Evolving Ethics of Engagement" maps out how Coetzee's literary representations could be read as calling for change that begins with the reader. According to Geoffrey Baker, Costello illustrates how "Coetzee's thematization of sympathy operates […] somewhere between the prescriptive call for political action and the Derridean/Adornian notion of transformation in the epistemological realm and as a necessary herald of practical change." (Baker 2005: 45) Baker speaks of "Coetzee's middle road – a practical agenda for transformative action that occurs on a seemingly non-political plane, at sites of interpersonal sympathy," which he sees as the "affective aim of Coetzee's fiction." (Baker 2005: 29/27)

In her essay "'Miracles of Creation': Animals in J.M. Coetzee's Work" Josephine Donovan notes that Coetzee's protagonists often experience an "intense empathetic identification with animal suffering and loss of dignity" (Donovan 2004: 83); most obviously in *Disgrace*, where David Lurie's encounter with animals proves to be a key to the development of his empathetic capacities, but also clearly so in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in which the Magistrate feels for the "barbarians" who are treated as though they were nonhuman animals. Similar themes occur regularly throughout Coetzee's oeuvre. This process

[16] See in particular Marais 2006. Also Marais 1998a/2001/2009 and Durrant 2006.

of identification is closely related to bodily experience, which provides a link to empathy via a visceral response. Both Lurie and the Magistrate suffer physical attacks that prepare the ground for a heightened moral awareness born of suffering: "Costello theorizes the attitude the Magistrate and David Lurie inarticulately exhibit, namely, that moral awareness depends upon a kind of visceral empathy." (Donovan 2004: 85) Donovan's notion of "visceral empathy" – empathy experienced primarily through the body – points to the importance of literary embodiment in regard to processes of empathy. Embodiedness also appears to be a central category in Elizabeth Costello's notion of understanding others and in their literary representation.

Kate McInturff's essay "Rex Oedipus: The Ethics of Sympathy in Recent Work by J.M. Coetzee" (2007) offers valuable insight and criticism on *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace*, relating the former to the question of kinship and the latter to the Ancient Greek myths of Oedipus and Antigone, with today's prisoners of war (i.e. Abu Ghraib) as a further point of reference. McInturff argues that Elizabeth Costello grounds her assertion of sympathy and empathy, of the "kinship of living beings," on "the ability of human beings to recognize a kinship with imaginative and fictional beings" – McInturff reads this as an "extension of Judith Butler's argument" presented in "On the Limits of Sovereignty," questioning the hierarchical "logic of patriarchy." (McInturff 2007: 2)[17] Like Baker, McInturff recognizes "Costello's ethical imperative to sympathise with the embodied experiences of other beings." And like Durrant and Marais, she notes the gap between the sympathetic imagination "in theory" and the sympathetic imagination "in practice," which McInturff finds confirmed by Costello herself in the chapter "The Problem of Evil" in *Elizabeth Costello* (McInturff 2007: 5). There, Costello discusses how Paul West's account of *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* (1980) had taken her to a place she would have preferred not to be at:

> There are many things that it is like, this storytelling business. One of them (so she says in one of the paragraphs she has not crossed out yet) is a bottle with a genie in it. When the storyteller opens the bottle, the genie is released into the world, and it costs all hell to get him back in again. Her position, her revised position, her position in the twilight of life: better, on the whole, that the genie stay in the bottle. (EC 167)[18]

In McInturff's reading – supported by the arguments of Marais and Durrant – Costello shows there might necessarily be ethical limitations to how far the sympathetic imagination should be allowed to take both reader and author. Nonetheless, all three critics are much in favour of

[17] "Read together, Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace* provide an important interrogation of the nature of the human and the violence concomitant to racially and sexually exclusive definitions of that category." (McInturff 2007: 3)

[18] Paul West kindly provided a response to Coetzee's text (West 2004).

Costello's fundamental appeal for sympathy and for all to embrace others more empathetically.

This notion is picked up by Don Randall in his 2007 essay "The Community of Sentient Beings: J.M. Coetzee's Ecology in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*," where he argues that Coetzee's discourse responds to "atrocity [situated] at the very core of modernity," referring both to our treatment of animals as well as our treatment of each other. (Randall 2007: 209) Randall sees affinities between Coetzee's texts and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975).[19] Randall stresses Costello's attempts to open the human borders "by making sentience rather than reason the criterion for inclusion in community." (Randall 2007: 211) Using the Magistrate of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an example, Randall argues that the reduction to "a life that is no more than bodily life" constitutes a "ground zero" on which to build "a sense of the human that is more expansive and more inclusive." (Randall 2007: 214) For what Randall terms Costello's "eco-ethics" the body has central importance:

> The body, clearly, is the coin, the currency, sustaining the fiction's ecological economy. Fullness of being absolutely requires the experience of embodied life, its gratifications and its liabilities; ecologically ethical life requires the recognition that such experience is profoundly shared. (Randall 2007: 220)

Coetzee writes in "a zone of intersection between sociopolitical and ecological concerns, to elaborate an ecologically oriented ethics that sharpens the critique of modern political regimes." (Randall 2007: 210) At the end, Randall quotes Lady Chandos' "primordially ecological" key statement from the Postscript of *Elizabeth Costello*: "Each creature is key to all other creatures." (EC 229; quoted in Randall 2007: 223)[20]

Another noteworthy contribution comes from Steven G. Kellmann. In "Coetzee and the Animals" (2002), Kellmann sees in Coetzee's empathetic engagement with animals a "logical extension of engagement with the Other" (Kellmann 2002: 327). Kellmann awkwardly applauds "Coetzee's skill at imagining the lives of dark-skinned men" and the "negative capability" Coetzee demonstrates:

> Michael K, in *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), Friday, in *Foe* (1986), and Vercueil, in *Age of Iron* (1990), are all assertions of negative capability, of Coetzee's skill at imagining the lives of dark-skinned men […] consistent with Coetzee's project of engaging alterity by transcending his own race, gender, and nationality. (Kellmann 2002: 326)

In the "coy autobiography" *Boyhood* (1998), Kellmann writes, Coetzee "attempts to realize Rimbaud's program of transforming the self into an Other; as if to demonstrate the French

[19] Alan Northover also chooses a link to Singer's *Animal Liberation* as point of departure in his essay, adding Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983) as another possible point of reference. Alisdair McIntyre's *After virtue: a study in moral theory* (1981) provides the framing discourse for Northover's argument (Northover 2009).

[20] Cf. Nethersole 2005.

poet's credo that 'Je est un autre,' Coetzee inscribes his life in the third-person." (Kellmann 2002: 326) The programmatic approximation to the other exercised in Coetzee's fictions is reflected in some of his characters: "Those Coetzee characters who resemble or possess special empathy with other species tend to share their author's respect for the alterity of the Other." (Kellmann 2002: 328) This respect for the other is dramatized in *The Lives of Animals* by putting "what Mikhail Bakhtin would call his dialogic imagination in the service of the author's sympathetic imagination." (Kellmann 2002: 330)

Lastly, Brenda Deen Schildgen's 2003 essay "'No Bounds to the Sympathetic Imagination' in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*" deserves special mentioning. She likens the discourse presented in *Elizabeth Costello* to Plato's *Symposium*, "a dialogue in which no single viewpoint can dominate, even though one particular voice has more discursive power." Schildgen aligns Coetzee with a number of "western philosophers in recent decades", listing Jacques Derrida, Peter Singer, Martha Nussbaum, Giorgio Agamben, Hélène Cixous as examples for thinkers turning their attention on the "question of animals and our ethical responsibilities to them." (Schildgen 2003: 324) Schildgen is more confident in her appraisal of Costello's "ethical imperative" to employ the sympathetic imagination in engaging with others, and she expresses her faith in the capacity of literary expression to foster this notion:

> Poetic language, particularly metaphor, can make us 'feel', the precise capability that modern philosophers have suggested aligns humans with animals. In other words, metaphor offers us this insight – to perceive, think, feel, even perhaps be or become like another. […] In other words, the novelist tells us, the poet can make us become the jaguar. This is not just sympathy or empathy. Through language, she implies, our souls/beings can 'poetically' transmigrate. (Schildgen 2003: 331)

Schildgen proposes that "poetry itself, through the metaphor and simile (or poetic discourse), overcomes, unifies, or attempts to unify the affective and the cognitive." (Schildgen 2003: 330) Like Randall she finishes her essay with a discussion of the Postscript to *Elizabeth Costello*, only that she links it to a reading of the preceding chapter "At the Gate," in which Costello expresses her belief in frogs.[21]

While I am most sympathetic to the faith expressed by Schildgen and the optimism of Kellmann and Randall, the acute criticism of Marais, Durrant, and McInturff reminds us that Coetzee's presentation of Costello and her ideas contains intellectual ambiguities and ironies that slightly unsettle a straightforward reading of her ideas. Both in my readings and in the theoretical framework presented in this introduction, the implicit limitations of the sympathetic imagination are taken into account. Often enough, the literary representation of a character's failure of the sympathetic imagination can be integrated as a demonstration that

[21] See also Head 2006.

challenges the reader in his own engagement with fictional characters. When the sympathetic imagination fails, the limitations become apparent and the underlying mechanisms are partially revealed to the reader. In accordance with the neuroscientific argument of empathy blockades, the staging of the sympathetic imagination necessarily implies failures on the side of the respective agents; for without limits the sympathetic imagination would not be best suited to trigger empathy in the reader. The double movement of approximation and distancing in parts affirms the scepticism of Marais and Durrant, but at the same time it enhances the empathetic effect of the sympathetic imagination.

## 1.4 Sympathy through Empathy

Having supplied a framework of how Coetzee via Costello outlines the sympathetic imagination in a literary discourse, I will now discuss how the sympathetic imagination relates to empathy. The terms empathy and sympathy are often used synonymously, but it is vital to note the difference. The definition offered here is synthesized mainly from social neurosciences. Sympathy means a feeling of compassion for another being, and implies a position of concern for their well-being. Empathy means the capacity to feel yourself into another being.[22] Sympathy therefore asserts an outside perspective, whereas empathy implies the notion of attempting to gain an inside perspective or at least an approximation of insight into the other's experience. Most commonly both terms are used in regard to suffering, but they can be applied to all kinds of emotional states. Sympathy, which occurs consciously, requires at least a minimal amount of empathy to facilitate grasping the inner state of the other, before one can feel with him, her, or it. Empathy (as opposed to sympathy) occurs pre-consciously and does not necessarily imply a position of well-meaning concern followed by the intention to help, since it initially occurs in a preconscious affective neutral mode. For the purpose of my argument the distinction importantly marks two different stages of engagement with the other. The author's *sympathetic imagination* becomes manifest in the mode of representation, including modalities of narrative structure and perspective, and these in turn can trigger the reader's own sympathetic imagination. Such a sympathetic engagement of the imagination within the complexity of a novel can further the reader's capacity for empathy.

[22] Promoting the concept of "radical compassion," Anita Nowak collected fifty-two definitions of empathy, illustrating the wide range of discourses on empathy. One of Nowak's sources, Khen Lampert, offers a definition that resonates with Costello's account of the poets' engagement with animals: "[Empathy] is what happens to us when we leave our own bodies [...] and find ourselves either momentarily or for a longer period of time in the mind of the other. We observe reality through her eyes, feel her emotions, share in her pain." (quoted in Nowak 2011: 16) Lampert links empathy to compassion; Costello might be considered sympathetic to such an approach.

Exactly how empathy works has been discussed at length in a large variety of discourses (see Nowak 2011), but the range of answers provided is testimony to the fuzziness of both terms and the lack of specificity in attendant explanations. The underlying mechanism of current neurological speculation about empathy is the mirroring of neurons. The fictional text carries traces of the sympathetic imagination of the author and of her or his empathy, which can be picked up and adopted by the reader. In this way, empathy takes place both in the creative process on the side of the author as well as on the receptive-creative side of the reader through a process of neurological assimilation to the representation.[23]

## 1.5 Neuroscience, Mirror Neurons, and Empathy

### 1.5.1 Rizzolatti/Pellegrino: The Discovery of Mirror Neurons

Elizabeth Costello situates sympathy in the heart, but neurosciences want us to locate this faculty in the brain and its neurological circuits. The initial discovery of mirror neurons through Giuseppe di Pellegrino, Giacomo Rizzolatti, Luciano Fadiga, Leonardo Fogassi, and Vittorio Gallese at the University of Parma dates back to 1992 (Zaboura 2009: 59). After some years of groundwork, in 1996 mirror neurons were tested in the context of action perception and consequent action simulation in macaque monkeys.[24] The experiments revealed that a certain type of neuron participates in a "mirroring" reaction or response on the part of the experimental subject, who imitates the neurological pattern active in the observed agent. [25] One early experiment involved a macaque monkey observing a man grasping a glass of water and raising it to his lips in order to drink; the neurons activated by the observation mirrored the performed action, revealing a nearly identical activation pattern: as if the observing macaque monkey had performed the action himself.[26]

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[23] According to Nadia Zaboura the mirror neurons evoke "a so-called *direct matching mechanism*, which assimilates the perceived action pattern to the own action repertoire; direct because it happens without mediation. By this process the observer is enabled *symmetrically to co-experience* what goes on inside the other, what moves him – in a literal sense referring to the neurophysiologic level. Due to the almost identical biological configuration of the interacting parties an *intersubjective shift of perspectives* takes place from a third person to a first person perspective, which accordingly is titled *simulation*." (Zaboura 2009: 63; my translation, emphasis added)

[24] Gallese et al. 1996.

[25] These findings resulted from a series of experiments with macaque monkeys made in a spirit not unlike that of Wolfgang Köhler, even though the methods this time are neurologically based: electrodes were implanted into the monkeys' brains to record the activities of their neuronal networks. In the spirit of Elizabeth Costello we should engage our sympathetic imagination to get an idea, however vague, of how disturbingly invasive such procedures must surely be for the subjects of such experiments. The debatable methods employed to obtain these results does not discredit the research.

[26] Rizzolatti/Sinigaglia 2008. Also: Rizzolatti/Craighero 2004.

### 1.5.2 Gallese: Empathy, the Shared Manifold, and Resonance Mechanisms

In 2001, Vittorio Gallese linked mirror neurons to empathy in his essay "The 'Shared Manifold' Hypothesis: from mirror neurons to empathy."[27] Gallese proposes that mirror neurons and empathy are instrumental for intersubjective understanding, which he considers fundamental for meeting the complex demands of contemporary human society: "Living in a complex society requires individuals to develop cognitive skills enabling them to cope with other individuals' actions, by recognizing them, understanding them, and reacting appropriately to them." (Gallese 2001: 33) Choosing this assessment as starting point for his argument, Gallese continues to assume that "we are able to understand the behaviour of others in terms of their mental states," which he chooses to designate as mind-reading (Gallese 2001: 33).

Gallese briefly discusses the representation of mental states as understood by proponents of the 'Theory of Mind' (short TOM; Gallese primarily refers to Premack and Woodruff 1978 and a later survey of the issue by Carruthers and Smith 1996; see Gallese 2001: 42-43). For the purposes of his argument, Gallese chooses to "conceive TOM as the result of a simulation routine by means of which we can pretend to be in the other's 'mental shoes' and use our own mind as a model for the mind of others." (Gallese refers to Gordon 1986; Harris 1989; in Gallese 2001: 42) Just as Theory of Mind gives access to the mindworlds of others, literature can evoke a simulation routine in the reader.

#### On Mirror Neurons

The neurological basis for the simulation postulated by proponents of Theory of Mind has been found to be a specific type of neurons that since have been termed mirror neurons. Gallese gives a brief overview of their discovery, which I shall attempt to summarize here.

Initially, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, David Perrett and co-workers discovered "in a cortical sector buried within the anterior part of the Superior Temporal Sulcus (STSa)"[28]

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[27] Gallese 2008.

[28] In spite of extensive reading of neuroscientific research, I cannot claim to have comprehensively grasped brain architecture. Research located mirror neurons in the ventral premotor cortex, area F5. Or, in more detail and with another distinction:

Mirror neurons have been discovered in area F5, which constitutes the most rostral part of the ventral premotor cortex. This area can be functionally parcelled in two sectors: one sector occupies the cortical convexity, and it is in this sector that mirror neurons are mostly clustered. The second sector is buried within the inferior limb of the arcuate sulcus, of which it constitutes the posterior bank. In this latter sector, a second class of visuomotor grasping-related neurons have been described, 'canonical neurons' (Rizzolatti et al., 1988; Murata et al., 1997; Rizzolatti et al., 2000; Gallese, 2000a). Canonical neurons are activated during the execution of goal-related movements such as grasping, holding, and manipulating objects. Unlike mirror neurons, however, they are not

a type of neuron that was "selectively activated by the observation of various types of body movements such as walking, turning the head, stretching the arm, bending the torso, etc." (for a review, see Carey et al. 1997; Jellema and Perrett 2001; quoted in Gallese 2001: 34) These neurons respond to goal-related behaviour, not to static presentations of hands or objects. (Perrett et al. 1990; quoted in Gallese 2001: 34) A series of single neuron recording experiments revealed, "that a particular set of neurons, activated during the execution of purposeful, goal-related hand actions, such as grasping, holding or manipulating objects, discharge also when the monkey observes similar hand actions performed by another individual." (Gallese 2001: 34) Early research was limited to the brains of macaque monkeys – with experiments that are not explicitly mentioned, but can well be imagined as highly intrusive and unpleasant for the animals. As to be expected, research was aimed at transferring these discoveries to the human brain, as Gallese notes:

> All these studies suggested that humans have a 'mirror matching system' similar to that originally discovered in monkeys. Whenever we are looking at someone performing an action, beside the activation of various visual areas, there is a concurrent activation of the motor circuits that are recruited when we ourselves perform that action. Although we do not overtly reproduce the observed action, nevertheless our motor system becomes active as *if* we were executing that very same action that we are observing. To spell it out in different words, action observation implies *action simulation*. (Gallese 2001: 37; original italics)

Gallese speaks of the necessity of a link being established between observed agent and observer and proposes that "the *embodiment* of the intended goal, shared by the agent and the observer" constitutes this intersubjective link. Gallese reads embodiment as depending on the "motor schema of the action," as opposed to "a purely visual description of its agent." (Gallese 2001: 36; original italics) Yawning and laughter are everyday examples of such a matching mechanism and the resulting contagious behaviour. (Gallese 2001: 37-38)

As we can see, the intentionality of (goal-directed) actions plays a vital part in the activation of mirror neurons. Or, as Gallese puts it: "*Agency* constitutes a key issue for the understanding of intersubjectivity and for explaining how individuals can interpret their social world." (Gallese 2001: 34; original italics) Gallese tentatively proposes: "I posit that a similar functional architecture might be at work also in the far more complex domain of intersubjective relationships." (Gallese 2001: 40)

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activated by action observation. They discharge during object observation, typically showing congruence between the type of grip they motorically code and the size/shape of the object that visually drives them. Both sectors of F5 are reciprocally connected to the primary motor cortex, area F1 (see Matelli et al. 1986; Rizzolatti et al. 1998).
In a particular sector of the premotor cortex – area F5 – there are therefore two distinct classes of neurons that code goal-related hand movements, and which differ for their visual responsiveness: mirror neurons respond to action observation, while canonical neurons respond to object observation (Gallese 2001: 39-40).

### Empathy and Embodiedness

Vittorio Gallese gives a concise account of the history of the term empathy:

> Empathy is a later English translation of the German word Einfühlung, originally introduced by Theodore Lipps (1903a) into the vocabulary of the psychology of aesthetic experience, to denote the relationship between an artwork and the observer, who imaginatively projects herself into the contemplated object. Lipps (1903b) extended the concept of Einfühlung also to the domain of intersubjectivity that he characterized in terms of *inner imitation* of the perceived movements of others. When I am watching an acrobat walking on a suspended wire, Lipps (1903b) notes, *I feel myself inside of him* (Ich fühle mich so in ihm). (Gallese 2001: 43; original italics)

Gallese continues to trace the term's further road into phenomenology, most prominently picked up by Husserl, who (in his posthumously published *Ideen II*) emphasizes the role of the acting body in perceiving – Merleau-Ponty similarly emphasizes the body's role.[29] Gallese mentions how Edith Stein (*On the Problem of Empathy*, 1912) stressed the notion that empathy largely relies on patterns of similarity between observer and observed, and he concludes: "[T]his seems to suggest that our 'grasping' of the meaning of the world doesn't *exclusively* rely on its visual representation, but is strongly influenced by action-related sensorimotor processes." (Gallese 2001: 43-44) This also applies in terms of intersubjective encounters: "Self and other relate to each other, because they both represent opposite extensions of the same correlative and reversible system self/other. The observer and the observed are part of a dynamic system governed by reversibility rules." (Gallese 2001: 44) Gallese concludes "that the neural matching mechanism constituted by mirror neurons – or by equivalent neurons in humans – described in the present paper, is crucial to establish an empathic link between different individuals." (Gallese 2001: 44)

### The Shared Manifold

Finally, Gallese expands the concept of the shared manifold, which "can be operationalized at three different levels: A phenomenological level; a functional level; and a subpersonal level":

> _The *phenomenological level* is the one responsible for the sense of similarity, of being individuals within a larger social community of persons like us, that we experience anytime we confront ourselves with other human beings. It could be defined also as the *empathic* level, provided that empathy is characterized in the 'enlarged' way I was advocating before. Actions, emotions and sensations experienced by others become meaningful to us because we can share them with them.
>
> _The *functional level* can be characterized in terms of simulation routines, as *if* processes enabling models of others to be created.

[29] Gallese notes: "Merleau-Ponty argues against the Cartesian equivalence between seeing and thinking, emphasizing the 'narcissistic' character of vision." (Gallese 2001: 44) Here we might feel prompted to think of Elizabeth Costello's anti-Cartesian stance or of Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn in *Dusklands* (see also Chapter 2).

> _The *subpersonal level* is instantiated as the result of the activity of a series of mirror matching neural circuits. A dual mode of operation, an *expressive* mode and a *receptive* mode characterizes these circuits. The activity of these neural circuits is, in turn, tightly coupled with multi-level changes within body-states (see below). (Gallese 45)

Translated into terms of literature, we can conclude that the phenomenological level lays the foundation for an empathetic shared experience of others. The functional level can be applied to both the writing and the reading process, where either the author or the reader simulates models of others. The subpersonal level might serve to distinguish between the expressing (author) and receiving (reader) end of this process. In this context, the case of a Huntington patient illuminates how our capacity for empathy might be under- or well-developed:

> A recent study published by Calder et al. (2000) shows that a Huntington patient who suffered damage to subcortical structures such as the insula and the putamen, is selectively impaired in detecting disgust in many different modalities, such as facial signals, non-verbal emotional sounds, and emotional prosody. The same patient is also selectively impaired in subjectively experiencing disgust and therefore in reacting appropriately to it. This clinical case, with all cautions required when single cases are involved, seems to suggest that once the subject has lost the capacity to *experience* and *express* a given emotion, the same emotion cannot be easily *represented* and *detected* in others. (Gallese 2001: 45; original italics)

Thought in terms of literature, this indicates the challenge of transmitting empathy through a text to an unknown reader, whose disposition has decisive influence on his text reception. I assume that reading might include the activity of mirror neurons, following a simple syllogism: If literature can evoke empathy in the reader, and mirror neurons constitute the neurological basis for empathy, then literature must induce the activity of mirror neurons. Gallese concedes the possibility of mirror neurons working in far more complex ways than just in goal-related action observation:

> To summarize, there is preliminary evidence that the same neural structures that are active during sensations and emotions are active also when the same sensations and emotions are to be detected in others. It appears therefore that a whole range of different 'mirror matching mechanisms' may be present in our brain. (Gallese 2001: 45)

### Resonance Mechanisms

> One important aspect of the *self* is the result of the individual's mirroring in the social organization of the outer world. According to Mead, the only way to *objectify* us is to assume the other's perspective, like looking at our reflection in a mirror. Through the medium of intersubjective communication the consequences produced by our actions in the observed behaviour of others contribute to build our personal identity (see Mead, 1934). (Gallese 2001: 44)

Gallese stresses our dependence on others in order to define ourselves. The mirror neurons enable our motor system to resonate with the observed agent (Gallese 2001: 38). Such 'resonance mechanism' can be triggered only through the establishment of an intersubjective link (Gallese 2001: 47). Gallese links this to the Shared Manifold discussed above, which

both "determines and constrains this intersubjective link." (Gallese 2001: 47) Gallese adds that "explicit theorizing is the only strategy available when the embodied resonance mechanisms of the shared manifold are deficient, as likely occurring in the case of autism." (Gallese 2001: 47) Literature is similar to such "explicit theorizing," since it takes place in our mind and within the realm of language. Coetzee's fiction shows how such theorizing can be augmented through techniques of literary embodiment and the strong focus on the mindworld of the protagonist and the intersubjective links established by him. Coetzee creates characters that resonate with the reader or other characters, offering complex simulations of isolation or attempted social interaction. Gallese states that simulation and resonance are fundamental aspects of our cerebral being:

> It appears therefore that a whole range of different 'mirror matching mechanisms' may be present in our brain. This subpersonal architecture of simulation, that we originally discovered and described in the domain of actions (di Pellegrino *et al.*, 1992; Gallese *et al.*, 1996a; Rizzolatti *et al.*, 1996a), is likely a *basic* organizational feature of our brain. (Gallese 2001: 46)

### 1.5.3 Jean Decety and Daniel Batson: Empathy and Morality

In contrast to Gallese, Jean Decety and Daniel Batson argue in their essay "Empathy and Morality: Integrating Social and Neuroscience Approaches" (2009) in more technical terms as can be seen in their initial definition of empathy:

> In social neuroscience, empathy refers to a psychological construct that involves representations (i.e., memories that are localized in distributed neural networks that encode information and, when temporarily activated, enable access to this stored information, e.g., shared affective representations) and processes (i.e., computational procedures that are neurally localized and are independent of the nature of modality of the stimulus that is being processed –e.g., decoupling mechanism between self and other). (Decety/Batson 2009: 110)

Decety and Batson distinguish between "bottom-up (rapid and unconscious) and top-down (conscious) information processing" in regard to empathy, which "can be broken down into a number of interacting macro-components":

> 1. Motor and physiological resonance mediated by the perception-action direct coupling and the autonomic nervous system that regulates bodily states, emotion and reactivity. This aspect primarily draws on motor, premotor, and somatosensory cortices, limbic system, and insula.
>
> 2. Meta-cognitive abilities to infer or imagine another person's thoughts or feelings to infer or imagine one's own thoughts or feelings in another's situation, including the capacity to distinguish between one's own thoughts and those of others, which is a key component of interpersonal interactions. The medial prefrontal cortex, dorsal anterior cingulated cortex and temporo-parietal junction play a critical role in these processes.
>
> 3. Emotion regulation modulates negative arousal and adds flexibility, allowing the individual to be less dependent on external cues. The lateral prefrontal cortex and the

> anterior cingulate with their reciprocal connections to the amygdala orbitofrontal cortex are part of a circuit that regulates emotion and cognition. (Decety/Batson 2009: 110)[30]

This admittedly very technical classification indicates the complexity of neuronal networks. Decety and Batson stress how empathy occurs on various levels that include both physiological and cognitive, as well as emotional aspects. Another statement in the essay of Decety and Batson resonates strongly with Elizabeth Costello's claim about the sympathetic imagination: "One of the most striking aspects of human empathy is that it can be felt for virtually any target – even targets of a different species." (Batson, Lishner, Cook, Sawyer 2005; quoted in Decety/Batson 2009: 113). Decety and Batson go on to speculate that our verbal expression of emotions privileges our empathetic potential over that of animals:

> These reports provide an opportunity to share, explain, and regulate emotional experience with others that is not found in other species. Conversation helps to develop empathy, for it is often here that one learns of shared experiences and feelings. (Decety/Batson 2009: 113)

If we understand a novel (and other literary forms) as a long asynchronous (and asymmetrical) conversation between author and reader, the same might apply to literature. Another aspect supporting this claim is the importance Decety and Batson attribute to perspective-taking:

> Further, successful perspective taking has been linked to altruistic motivation (Batson et al., 1991). Using mental imagery to take the perspective of another is a powerful way to place oneself in the situation or emotional state of that person. Mental imagery not only enables us to see the world of our conspecifics through their eyes or in their shoes, but may also result in similar sensations as the other person's (Decety and Grèzes, 2006). (Decety/Batson 2009: 117; see also Decety 2005)

What Decety terms "mental imagery" seems to me a paradigmatic trait of literature, since a text offers hardly any visual stimuli, but instead relies almost completely on the reader's capacity for creating the according mental imagery during the reading process.

Another helpful distinction discussed by Decety pertains to how we might attempt to gain access to the mind-worlds of others, either by "focusing on another's feelings (imagine other), [which] may evoke stronger empathic concern, while explicitly putting oneself into the shoes of the target (imagining the self) induces both empathic concern and personal distress." (Decety/Batson 2009: 117) Remaining detached is a third option, but clearly less conducive than empathy; as was shown in a study by Batson, Early, and Salvarini in 1997. Decety concludes: "This observation may help to explain why observing a need situation does not

[30] "It is worth noting that there are bidirectional anatomical and functional links between the (widely distributed) areas in which representations of emotions are temporarily activated (including autonomic and somatic responses) during empathic experience and the areas involved in emotion regulation and meta-cognition. Each region has unique patterns of intracerebral connections, which determines its function, and differences in neural activity during the experience of empathy are produced by distributed subsystems of brain regions.
Even though there is massive parallel processing, the dynamic interaction of these regions is also an important aspect to be investigated further." (Decety/Batson 2009: 110) See also Decety/Jackson 2004.

always yield to prosocial behavior: if perceiving another person in an emotionally or physically painful circumstance elicits personal distress or a detached, objective perspective, then the observer may tend not to fully attend to the other's experience and as a result lack sympathetic behavior." (Decety/Batson 2009: 117)

Decety's argument goes on to discuss how perspective-taking might be processed on a neurological level:

> Interestingly, cognitive neuroscience research demonstrates that when individuals adopt the perspective of others, neural circuits common to the ones underlying first-person experiences are activated as well. However, taking the perspective of the other produces further activation in specific parts of the frontal cortex that are implicated in executive functions, particularly inhibitory control (e.g. Ruby and Decety, 2003, 2004). In line with these findings, the frontal lobes may functionally serve to separate perspectives, or resist interference from one's own perspective when adopting the subjective perspective of others (Decety & Jackson, 2004). This ability is of particular importance when observing another's distress, since a complete merging with the target would lead to confusion as to who is experiencing the negative emotions and therefore to different motivations as to who should be the target of supportive behavior. (Decety/Batson 2009: 117)

In other contexts this phenomenon is tagged as *emotional contagion*. (see Decety/Batson 2009: 119-120) Imagining-Self-as-Other lacks emotional distance, which negatively affects the potential for empathy to develop; in Decety and Batson's terms: "The behavioral data confirmed that explicitly projecting oneself into an aversive situation leads to higher personal distress – while focusing on the emotional and behavioral reactions of another in distress is accompanied by higher empathic concern and lower personal distress." (Decety/Batson 2009: 118)

Whether these results may rightfully be transferred to the narratological aspects of literature remains to be seen. Coetzee's fictions provide many instances of first-person and third-person perspective-taking, which could be correlated to imagining-self and imagining-other. Decety and Batson here provide a framework that might be fruitfully applied to literary narration. Decety concludes:

> This finding was interpreted as indicating that a focus on the target's feelings (imagine other) produced more other-oriented feeling for the target when focusing on his affective expressions and motor responses, while the first person perspective (imagine self) led to more self-oriented responding that was less a response to the presumed feelings of the target. (Decety/Batson 2009: 119)[31]

In my discussion of Coetzee's fictions I will argue that emotional contagion is largely avoided in favour of an empathetic response. Again, in Decety and Batson's terms:

> These important aspects are likely to be involved in distinguishing emotional contagion, which relies heavily on the automatic link between perceiving the emotions of another and

[31] "Yet a minimal distinction between self and other is essential for social interaction in general and for empathy in particular, and new work in social neuroscience has demonstrated that the self and other are distinguished at both the behavioral and neural levels." (Decety/Batson 2009: 123)

> one's own experience of the same emotion, from empathic responses which call for a more detached relation. The neural responses identified in these studies as non-overlapping between self and other may take advantage of available processing capacities to plan appropriate future actions concerning the other. (Decety/Batson 2009: 119)

Another crucial aspect of Decety and Batson's larger argument pertains to emotion regulation, something we continually are confronted with in the characters created by Coetzee:

> Emotion regulation seems to have a particularly important role in social interaction, and it has a clear adaptive function for both the individual and the species (Ochsner and Gross, 2005). Importantly, it has been demonstrated that individuals who can regulate their emotions are more likely to experience empathy, and also to interact in morally desirable ways with others (Eisenberg et al., 1994). In contrast, people who experience their emotions intensely, especially negative emotions, are more prone to personal distress, an aversive emotional reaction, such as anxiety or discomfort based on the recognition of another's emotional state or condition. (Decety/Batson 2009: 120)

Fritz Breithaupt (discussed in 1.6) presents a similar argument when he proposes the concepts of *cognitive empathy* and *narrative empathy*.

Like Gallese, Decety and Batson cannot help but think of how these findings might benefit society:

> Further studies are required to increase our knowledge about the various factors, processes and (neural and behavioral) effects involved in and resulting from the modulation of empathic responses. This knowledge will inform us how empathy can be promoted to ultimately increase humankind's ability to act in more prosocial and altruistic ways. (Decety/Batson 2009: 122)

Decety and Batson also don't fail to emphasize the importance of taking into account the notion of embodied cognition: "These accounts of empathy are in harmony with theories of embodied cognition, which contend that cognitive representations and operations are fundamentally grounded in bodily states and in the brain's modality-specific systems (Niedenthal, Barsalou, Ric, and Krauth-Gruber, 2005)." (Decety/Batson 2009: 123-124)[32]

In conclusion I might say that Decety and Batson's comments on perspective-taking in terms of imagining-as-self and imagining-as-other will prove helpful in my discussion of Coetzee's narrative strategies. Decety and Batson add some complexity to these processes, which in Gallese's account were not so prominent for the sake of presenting his larger argument of the Shared Manifold. The three levels on which empathy might become effective include our physical properties, our cognitive functions as well as our emotional processing of situations.

[32] For a more interdisciplinary approach see Decety/Ickes 2009.

### 1.5.4 Damasio, LeDoux, Tomasello: Embodied Cognition

Apart from first encounters with cognitive studies during my studies of philosophy, Antonio Damasio, Joseph LeDoux and Michael Tomasello paved the way for a more comprehensive understanding of how the brain works, of its evolution and the inescapable embodiedness of cognitive processes. All three authors have succeeded in making new discoveries of the neurosciences accessible to the average reader. They share an abstention from narrowly focusing on brain functions, and establish instead a larger context by linking cognition with emotions (Damasio and LeDoux) or with cultural evolution (Tomasello). In the context of my research, I have taken several cues from these authors, of which I shall present some in the following.

The observations made by these authors regarding embodied cognition will prove useful in the discussion of literary embodiment in the fictions of Coetzee, creating a link between the bodily states of characters and their mindsets and, at the same time, shedding light on their relations to others.

#### Damasio: Feeling and Thinking beyond Descartes

As early as 1994, Antonio R. Damasio prominently launched an attack against the Cartesian logic of the mind-body dualism in his book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain.* He did so by arguing from the viewpoint of neurosciences and used the case studies of Phineas Gage[33] and his own patient Elliot. In the context of my research I will only mention some cues I took from Damasio.

I find the assumption of *visual dispositional representations* in our brain of external visual stimuli very convincing (Damasio 1994: 104-106). As an example Damasio chose the act of remembering somebody's face and claimed that whoever else would remember the same person would show a similar activity pattern in his visual cortex.

But more importantly, Damasio establishes the fact that cognitive processes cannot be thought independently from the body; his theory of somatic markers guiding our decisions is of minor importance here. Following the intuition that reading might activate mirror neurons, I am interested in cerebral perception of external stimuli. Damasio gives a captivating brief account of how a visual impression might register in our mind:

[33] The case of Phineas Gage has often been represented as the initiation of neuroscience. A metal rod severely damaged his brain, and the resulting effects on his character gave cause to suspect a strong connection between certain character traits and certain brain regions. Due to ethical restraints regarding experiments on live test subjects, cases of brain lesions have often been the starting point for neuroscientific research.

> Nonconsciously, automatically and involuntarily, the response of the prefrontal dispositional representations [...] is signaled to the amygdala and anterior cingulate. Dispositional representations in the latter regions respond a) by activating nuclei of the autonomic nervous system and signaling to the body via peripheral nerves, with the result that viscera are placed in the state most commonly associated with the type of triggering situation; b) by dispatching signals to the motor system, so that the skeletal muscles complete the external picture of an emotion in facial expressions and body posture; c) by activating the endocrine and peptide systems, whose chemical reactions result in changes in body and brain states; and finally, d) by activating, with particular patterns, the nonspecific neurotransmitter nuclei in brain stem and basal forebrain which then release their chemical messages in varied regions of the telencephalon (e.g., basal ganglia and cerebral cortex). This apparently exhausting collection of actions is a massive response; it is varied. It is aimed at the whole organism, and in a healthy person, it is a marvel of coordination.
>
> The changes caused by (a), (b), and (c) impinge on the body, cause an "emotional body state," and are subsequently signalled back to the limbic *and* somatosensory systems. The changes caused by (d), which do not arise in the body proper but rather in a group of brain stem structures in charge of body regulation, have a major impact in the style and efficiency of cognitive processes and constitute a parallel route for the emotional response. (Damasio 1994: 137f)

Dispositional representations primarily refer to visual stimuli, since these can most easily be tested. However, reading also renders representations; since these are coded in writing, their impact might be less immediate and must be translated semantically, but by and large the impact might occur in a comparable fashion.

Damasio speaks of the "apparatus of primary emotions," which includes the capability to process signals pertaining to the personal or social behaviour; this apparatus is capable of pairing a large number of social situations with adaptive somatic reactions (Damasio 1994: 219-222). Put more simply, these somatic markers remind us how to react to a given situation, given that we have made a comparable experience previously.

Transferring this notion to the realm of literature, which confronts us with more situations than we could possibly experience in real life, since – once, because our experiences tend to be limited in both time and space, but more importantly because literature allows us to experience the world through another mind (a similar argument might be made for other forms of art, but that is another story).

### LeDoux: The Emotional Brain

In 1996 Joseph LeDoux presented an account of how emotions come into being and how they affect the brain: *The Emotional Brain. The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*.[34] Again, I will only present a few aspects of the study.

LeDoux starts with the basic assumption that emotional reactions are produced unconsciously, but in our recording of the feeling we experience it very consciously; this leads

[34] In this section all quotes are taken from Ledoux 1998 [1996].

LeDoux to conclude that an emotional experience encompasses a far more complex process than we are aware of. Emotions happen to us rather than being called for (LeDoux 1998: 16-21). The emotional process in the brain is largely restricted to the emotional unconscious (LeDoux 2010: 55-64); quoting McLean, LeDoux compares the image of the large cells of the *hippocampus* to an emotional claviature (piano keyboard). These cells are arranged scrupulously next to each other: "When the elements of the sensory world activate these cells, the tunes they play are the emotions we experience." (LeDoux 2010: 95; 92-98)

Brought together with Damasio's idea of somatic markers, we might, when imagining literature, enhance both our external repertoire of perceived situations and emotions as well as our internal repertoire of experienced emotions and emotional reactions. Imagine the author as a pianist performing on his own claviature, but in a second instance prompting the reader's emotional claviature to resonate with the emotional soundscape presented in the text.

**Tomasello: Cultural Evolution of Empathy**

The neurosciences are increasingly paying attention to interactions between body and brain to develop a more holistic model of how our minds works, and this trend is continued by Michael Tomasello, who argues from an evolutionary point of view in his study *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (1999). His observations on the cultural evolution of human beings are insightful and precise. One starting point of his argument is the assumption that the impressive set of cognitive capabilities of modern man is the result of a singular method of cultural transfers across generations (Tomasello 1999: 4-12). An illustrative metaphor for this process is the ratchet effect, which understands our cultural evolution as a cumulative process, stabilizing invention and innovation in the human community through cultural heredity (Tomasello 1999: 5). Tomasello goes on to analyze learning techniques which supported this cultural evolution, postulating that learning was primarily enabled by a special form of social cognition that allows individual organisms to understand others as beings similar to themselves, with a comparable intentionality and inner life as themselves (Tomasello 1999: 8-10). The role of language representation plays an important part for the cultural revolution, since the language symbols free human cognition from immediate sensory perception not only by allowing a reference to things outside of the subjects' immediate context, but far more by allowing simultaneous representation of a large variety of imaginable situations (Tomasello 2002: 9). Again, I propose that literature poses an excellent example of how a multitude of thoughts and images can transfer cultural knowledge to the reader.

### 1.5.5 Zaboura: The Empathetic Brain

In 2009, Nadia Zaboura related research on mirror neurons to the social sciences and the humanities, ultimately suggesting that there might exist a more complex network of different types of mirror neurons allowing for more complex functions than just mimetic learning and adaptation.[35] Whether this can be applied to the reading process is hard to tell, because research on reading has so far concentrated on single words; extending research to integrated text comprehension is a future goal. So far it has been proved that reading a text involves various cognitive areas of the brain, performing a circuit that ends up in the frontal cortex where the final integrated text comprehension takes place.[36] It remains a highly speculative hypothesis at this point that this could involve a complex system of mirror neurons; however, my readings of Coetzee's fictions will offer numerous instances that support this claim.

Although mirror neurons have been primarily found to respond to intention-directed actions, their involvement in more complex cognitive processes cannot be precluded (Zaboura 2009: 8). Zaboura's description of mirror neurons employs a series of interesting word choices:

> [The mirror neurons] cause a so-called *direct matching mechanism*, which assimilates the outer action pattern to the own action repertoire; 'direct' because it happens without mediation. By this process the observer is enabled to *symmetrically co-experience* what goes on inside the other, what moves him – in a literal sense referring to the neurophysiological level. Due to the almost identical biological configuration of the interacting parties an *intersubjective shift of perspectives* takes place, from a third person to a first person perspective, which accordingly is titled *simulation*. The significance of the resonance phenomenon as creating intersubjectivity becomes apparent: „A crucial element of social cognition is the brain's capacity to directly link the first- and third-person experiences of these phenomena (i.e. link 'I do and I feel' with 'he does and he feels')." (Gallese et al. 2004: 397) (Zaboura 2009: 61; original emphasis)[37]

[35] Zaboura notes that the search for other types of mirror neurons remains a huge task considering the sheer amount of 100 billion neurons available. She reports the discovery of mirror neurons responding to audiovisual input, with more discoveries lying ahead. (Zaboura 2009: 75-76) Gallese had a similar intuition (see above).

[36] Perfetti and Bolger have charted how the brain manages text comprehension:

> Increasing skill is marked by the coordination of these constituents into a more integrated functional system of cortical structures. Neuroimaging research provides a surprisingly clear view of the reading circuit that develops with this learning. This circuit includes three major cortical regions: from back to front, (a) ventral (occipito–temporal), (b) dorsal (a temporo–parietal area, roughly corresponding to Wernicke's area), and (c) left frontal (Broca's area, the inferior frontal gyrus, and insular cortex). We characterize these regions rather broadly (each includes differentiated structures), and we caution against simple local mappings of functions to areas. However, the three regions are engaged in functions critical in reading: visual–orthographic processes in the ventral region; phonological decomposition in the dorsal region; and, in the frontal region, both phonological–articulatory processes (Fiez & Petersen, 1998) and semantic processes (Poldrack et al., 1999). (Perfetti/Bolger 2004: 294)

[37] All quotes from Zaboura are rendered in my translation from German original.

If we transfer this description to the reading process, we must take into account that the reader is not reacting to an outer action pattern, but instead to an imagined action pattern (substitute action by self-reflective thought for readers of Coetzee). Let us imagine how our bodies respond to a text, how a text can affect us, make us symmetrically co-experience joys and worries of a literary character. The intersubjective shifts continuously prompted by Coetzee's fictions are of the second order to the intersubjective shift underlying the reader's primary social cognition.

Zaboura also speaks of an "inner parallelism" establishing itself when an exogenous pattern is reproduced endogenously (Zaboura 2009: 65). While the reader more and more aligns his sympathies with Coetzeean characters, the characters themselves rather experience endless parallels that never meet, just as the boats pass each other in Coetzee's Nobel prize speech "He and His Man": "Their ships pass close, […] they pass each other by, too busy even to wave." (HHM 14) But the sheer presence of an other can resonate in our motor system (Zaboura 2009: 65). A specific neuronal blocking mechanism exists, however, that limits the firing energy of the neurons to a certain threshold, thereby inhibiting the neuronal simulation of the perceived action from causing motor action in the observer (Zaboura 2009: 69).

Zaboura describes the opening of an *interpersonal space*, when it is informed by the internal representation and by collating of the perceived with the own repertoire of actions: "This form of intersubjectivity is hence useful for actions of a higher social order, such as interactions mediated by symbols." (Zaboura 2006: 69; my translation) This *interpersonal space* is opened by the subconscious perception of gestures that indicate "meaningful" content. Applying this to fictional texts, the reader might respond to representations of bodily gestures in a way that involves an activation of mirror neurons.

Zaboura points out that around thirty percent of the mirror neurons discovered so far are *strict congruent mirror neurons*, meaning that they can be attributed to specific types of actions (such as grabbing hand etc.). The larger percentage (around sixty percent) represents *broad congruent mirror-neurons*, meaning that they respond to various and more general stimuli (Zaboura 2009: 70). Multimodal overlaps of different sense systems, as for example a tactile-auditory combination, are assumed to occur (Zaboura 2009: 74). Zaboura's larger argument proposes the possibility of far more complex interactions between mirror neurons than so far researched. She puts into perspective the early stage of the research on mirror neurons:

> In spite of the progress made so far, the investigation of the brain and the onerous search for mirror neurons in the Cortex cerebri is still at the beginning. Looking at a total number of 100 billion neurons it will take considerable time to detect single mirroring cells. Even though it is the search for a needle in a haystack, by now cells have been found – in addition to the F5 and PF neurons with visual-motor capacities – that react to acoustic stimuli: *audiovisual* mirror neurons, that not only discharge when perceiving or performing an action, but also when hearing the action, as when a paper is torn to pieces. (Zaboura 2009: 75-76)

From here it is only another step – scientifically a leap of faith – to imagining that mirror neurons could be activated by purely symbolic, i.e. literary, representations. We all know how a fictional text can affect our sensual perception, such as conjuring a smell or certain sounds, let alone the activation of memories.

Another aspect raised by Zaboura pertains to a possible evolution of mirror neurons: "The resonance phenomenon and Tomasello's social constructivism share in common the potential of a face-to-face-encounter; this is a precondition for a shared inherent and co-created *joint attention* [...] that upholds communicative intersubjectivity." (Zaboura 2009: 77-78) In our human evolution, Zaboura argues, not alone the general progressive enzephalisation (i.e. growing brain) but also a *re-wiring* of existing neuronal networks to more complex circuits were required for the senso-motor coupling of mirror neurons (Zaboura 2009: 79). The new feature, supposedly not available to primates, is perspective-taking.

**Joint Attention and Perspective-Sharing**

Humans are capable of imagining third person perspectives. This can happen consciously through symbol-mediated language or through the unconscious resonance phenomenon (Zaboura 2009: 82-83). In any case, the perspective is always embodied, not necessarily but possibly in a physical sense; at least insofar as through perception-matching the space of the other is inhabited. Zaboura draws on Tomasello to mark the shift from a purely individual research perspective to a broader social context:

> What he [Tomasello] and the Italian researchers [Rizzolatti and Gallese] share is the principle of body-bound [*körpergebunden*] *perspectivity*, which humans are capable of occupying. Whereas the discoverers of the mirror neurons explain this exclusively through pure auto-simulation [*Eigensimulation*], Tomasello places this in a larger social context. The complex overall situation, in which individuals per se are embedded through their spatial-somatic physical extension, is always kept in mind. Exactly at this point the importance of such a parallel must be emphasized and extended to the connection mentioned several times before: the understanding of mirror neurons as fundamental substance of the resonance that enables higher cognitive and social processes, shared by individuals. For humans are not exclusively body- and therefore ego-centered, but a living and experiencing body, in which a fundamental perspective shift within the individual becomes manifest. (Zaboura 2009: 86-87; my translation)

The „experiencing body," mentioned in the last sentence, comes very close to what Elizabeth Costello says about embodiment, and maybe even closer to Coetzee's stark portrayal of Michael K.

Zaboura, again drawing on Tomasello's work, continues to move towards a broader social context and notes that humans share the capacity for a triadic attention, constituting a subject-subject-object interrelation, or along the poles *Ego*, *Alter Ego*, and environment. Zaboura illustrates this with the shared attention of babies after their "socio-cognitive nine month revolution" (Tomasello 2002: 88), when they begin to understand and recognize a shared visual focus – as for example when their eyes follow the direction of another's look. This constitutes an intersubjective social context, in which symbolic representations become possible (Zaboura 2009: 87-88).

In the novels of Coetzee we can find countless occasions that can be seen as staged moments of joint attention between characters, and even with the author himself. The resulting intersubjective space requires a response from the reader, urges him to open up and embrace the presented other. This quality of activating the sympathetic imagination of the reader and encouraging his empathetic engagement I attribute largely to the craftsmanship of Coetzee, as I will later show in detail.

## 1.6 Fritz Breithaupt: Narrative Empathy

Also in 2009, Fritz Breithaupt published his study *Kulturen der Empathie*, which combines the research of mirror neurons with the literary analysis of narratives. Breithaupt provides the toolkit for looking at literature and its relation to empathy with the aid of neurosciences. Beginning with a fundamental assessment of empathy as an evolutionary pattern, in which narrative improves the predictability of future actions. In a wording resonating with Costello's statement about the unlimited potential of the sympathetic imagination, Breithaupt states:

> Wir besitzen anscheinend die Fähigkeit, uns wie unbegrenzt in alles einfühlen zu können, um es auf uns vertraute Schemata zu beziehen und dadurch imaginäre Brücken zwischen uns und anderen zu errichten, ohne das tatsächlich Unähnliche als Unähnliches mitdenken zu müssen.
>
> [We seem to possess the ability to feel ourselves into anything without limitations, in order to relate it to familiar schemes and thereby erect imaginary bridges between us and others, without having to think the actually dissimilar as dissimilar.] (Breithaupt 2009: 20)[38]

[38] This and all subsequent Breithaupt translations into English are mine.

Breithaupt considers the easiness of seeing similarities and assumes that the production of dissimilarity might strongly contribute to the process of empathy. Coetzee's constructions of others and the way his protagonists encounter them is an excellent illustration for this.

Breithaupt's insistence on dissimilarity as a prerequisite for empathetic engagement is highly original. Only a mechanism that reflects dissimilarity can guarantee the canalisation and focalization of empathy (Breithaupt 2009: 21). Empathy (understood as a de-coding of emotions, affects and actions of an other as other) requires the drawing of a borderline between me and the other – a borderline that is defined by empathy (Breithaupt 2009: 31). Breithaupt uses the argument for dissimilarity to achieve a transfer to the performing arts, in particular the drama: Along with our growing awareness of difference empathy could be thought to grow. Empathy becomes our medium to translate the difference in a way that allows it to remain different. For Breithaupt the theatre stage constitutes a place that trains empathy with the new individual (Breithaupt 2009: 56). The staged scene of a drama creates a typical triadic setting: viewer-actor-actor (unless of course it is a monologue or suchlike). When an observer witnesses a conflict which sets two parties against each other, he will pick up cues as to the intentions of the players and their goals. This process requires the observer to employ his empathy. Depending on the scene, he will develop sympathy towards either one or both of the acting parties and pass judgement on them; all this under the as-if clause of dramatic representation. Breithaupt assumes that the observer adopts a stance outside of his usual self, an intersubjective being that extends further beyond him than at other times:

> It is as if an intersubjective being is activated, which might as well be me or someone else. This intersubject or hypersubject (even before differentiating between me and others) allows me to concentrate on the situation and shed the individual ballast of myself and others for the moment. (I allege:) In this situation we are all equal. (Breithaupt 2009: 73)

The equality of observers proposed here refers only to the situation, not to the individual perceptions that follow. Each observer – and each reader – will experience the presented situation individually and draw his own conclusions.

In his chapter on *narrative empathy* Breithaupt proposes a "narrative intelligence hypothesis" (Breithaupt 2009: 115), implying that "narrative consciousness" means thinking in hypotheses and excuses. People affected cannot help but think in terms of narrative, thereby continuously producing narrative excess (on top of that they feel a constant pressure of having to explain themselves, to legitimate themselves. Breithaupt sees one central feature of narrative in the (sometimes surprisingly) emergence of the alterity of characters presented. Narrative destroys the perspective of the observer (annuls it). Breithaupt differentiates between beings with narrative intelligence and those without, naming three aspects that

qualify this distinction: 1) the ability to manipulate events by narration 2) the strategic communication of experiences und the potential to learn from others' experience 3) the regime of narratability. The last aspect gets elaborated:

> Whoever has the ability of narration, does not only store the behavior (of oneself and of others) in the memory, but prior to this already observes and selects behaviors according to narrative criteria and activates this narrative self-observation whenever an action occurs, even when it has not been brought to its conclusion. The texture of consciousness consists at least in parts of narration. (Breithaupt 2009: 130)

While this may sound like a high-brow classification, Breithaupt assumes narrative intelligence to be a fundamental aspect of our self-understanding and our construction of identity. More interesting than his basic assumptions are the conclusions he draws from them. In the above-mentioned dramatic situation (while Breithaupt speaks of it as an *Urszene* – a primeval foundational scene – of empathy, the search for evolutionary beginnings is not relevant here) the observer approaches the scene with his narrative intelligence, in the act developing alternative perspectives and constructing various causal chains. The body and psyche of the other become the boom box (*Resonanzkörper* – resonating body)[39] of our experience, our actions and emotions. Breithaupt postulates that narration can only take place if the unfolding events affect a body that allows us to share their suffering and their experience (Breithaupt 2009: 145). Breithaupt indicates how this experience can affect the observer:

> The body and the psyche of the inhabitant of the perspective are the boom box of the event. And insofar as the viewer or observer is connected to this perspective, insofar that he has taken part in enabling it, he is also affected, resonates and in the case of a cathartic rupture of the character achieves a maximum sound – and is evicted simultaneously. The potential alterity of causal connections grips the person/the character: The character becomes different/other. (Breithaupt 2009: 146)

Becoming other could be seen as the central goal in the fictions of Coetzee, and Breithaupt's descriptive analysis runs to the conclusion that our empathy is maximized, if and when the perspective-sharing with the character is disrupted. While perspective-sharing is the access point for any observer to experience empathy, only the disruption of this narrative perspective can bring about a maximum of empathy:

> Only those who inhabit the perspective of an involved character can register and sense the significance of events. At the same time, the perspective of another person is only inhabited or shared when the result affects this perspective, damages it, corrupts it, destroys it. Therefore a perspective is adopted that will stop being one. Empathy in its most extreme augmentation is the form of identification that simultaneously suspends all identification. Empathy is the culmination of excitement with or close to the other, and it represents a cleansing of the excitement. Empathy is maximized shared suffering, which depletes itself in the moment. (Breithaupt 2009: 147-8)

[39] Empathy relies on the possibility of insight into the motivations and intentions of the parties, whereby they become the "soundbox of experience" (*Resonanzkörper des Erlebens*); Breithaupt 2009: 145, 146).

The ambivalence of perspective-taking, at once the facilitator of empathy and its inhibitor, is an essential part of Breithaupt's theory. As argued above, empathy only becomes possible through an awareness of difference, and a total identification with the other is not desirable, since emotional contagion will create unrest rather than empathy.

Breithaupt applies his *narrative theory of empathy* to drama and assumes a dualistic setting based on the three-fold structure of two opposing parties and an observer. The setting must provide the observer with the opportunity to engage with the protagonist and his actions by implicating him in the outlook and predictability of the future course of events. However, in a second step the observer must be able to beware himself from a loss of self in this process, wherefore the empathetic process necessarily includes blockades of identification,[40] allowing the observer to stay at a safe distance – otherwise he would risk losing himself in the process of identification. Nearly all of Coetzee's fictional texts can serve to exemplify these notions of empathy. The protagonists always suffer in one way or the other, are tragic heroes of a kind. The narrative strategies Coetzee employs allow the reader much insight into the respective characters, but at the same time keeps him at a distance by questioning narrative authority and reliability, be it of the character or the author himself.

The theory of narrative empathy is a vital link between the neuroscientific concept of empathy and the sympathetic imagination of Coetzee's fiction, as it bridges the gap between literature and neuroscience, allowing for a meaningful intersection; narrative empathy explains the transformation of input into information via mirror neurons: "Erst durch die Filter der narrativen Empathie kann aus dem Mitlaufen der Spiegelneuronen Information werden." [Only the filters of narrative empathy enable the coactive mirror neurons to produce information.] (Breithaupt 2009: 187) Coetzee's sympathetic imagination uses narrative to create an intersubjective space, which allows a "hypersubject" (Breithaupt 2009: 73) or the "intersubjective manifold" (Gallese 2001) to come into being, which offers the perfect stage for the mirror neurons and empathy to play out.

## 1.7 The Empathy Effect

Coetzee offers the reader a vast amount of situations, character constellations, and conflicts to be added to the already available cognitive repertoire. All these scenarios enhance the ability of the reader to deal with real-life situations, even though he may never find himself in a think tank designing war strategies, on a desolate farm, in a military outpost of an

[40] „Es gibt viel empathisches Geräusch, aber erst die Blockade erzeugt eine Kultur der Empathie." [There exists a lot of empathetic noise, but only the blockade creates a culture of empathy.] (Breithaupt 2009: 114)

empire, in a camp or a burrow, affected by cancer in a racially segregated society, washed ashore on a solitary island, in the streets of Petersburg mourning the loss of a child, in a childhood memory, in a slaughterhouse, in an academic lecture, putting dogs to sleep, breaking a leg in a bicycle accident, or musing on one's own death. But all these scenarios will have equipped him well to open his heart and let the sympathetic imagination take hold of it/him.[41] As De Vega puts it:

> Knowledge is organized around situations, because situations are what we live in and act out our lives in. Scenarios constitute proxy-situated cognition. That is, on the basis of a mapping between a language description and a scenario, proxy-situated cognition can occur. This is because the constraints of reasoning employed in real situations apply by proxy in reasoning with scenarios. (quoted in Sanford 2009: 184)[42]

In his analysis of *Disgrace* with reference to Sophocles' *King Oedipus* – a link also explored by Kate McInturff – Michiel Heyns tells the story of the actor Laurence Olivier imitating the death cry of a trapped mink to illustrate on stage the ultimate realization of Oedipus; noting its effect on the audience Olivier exits with a vindictive smile on his lips (Got them!). Heyns sees this as "the artistic implementation of the sympathetic imagination":

> It enables Olivier in the first place to enter into the consciousness of the trapped mink and to transpose his sympathetic understanding to his rendering of the character he is playing – in order to activate the sympathetic imagination of the audience: the agony of the mink is transmuted into the audience's pity and terror. For the trapped mink read dog with maimed hindquarters, for audience read us, the reader, for Oedipus read Lurie, for Olivier read Coetzee, for 'Got them' read the near-imperceptible smile on Coetzee's face on the dust jacket. (Heyns 2005: 215)

Not that Coetzee ever intended a sensationalist effect like Olivier surely did, but nevertheless his fiction has successfully drawn readers in and activated their sympathetic imagination, thereby increasing their empathetic capabilities. The countless encounters with the other, in various forms and guises – lastly leading to a grand moment of myriad self-reflection in *Summertime*, in which Coetzee brilliantly reapplies the sympathetic imagination to himself and his public image – have trained the reader to engage with the other while preserving its autonomy as well as his own, thereby creating the optimal situation for empathy to come into

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[41] The use of the male pronoun here reflects my own position as a male reader; whether gender is relevant to our experience of empathy will not be answered in this study, but would certainly add an interesting additional twist to the argument.

[42] Another insightful account of how scenarios and situations represented in texts can be related to processes of cognition can be found in Lope De Vega's *Symbol and Embodiment* (2008). De Vega claims that "[s]emantic fields are ‚situated'" (De Vega 2008: 182) and that „meaning has to be rooted in our physical (and social) interactions with the world." (De Vega 2008: 183) In a more practical sense:

> Reading about rock climbing is not the same as doing it, though to the extent that we can understand what we read, the language processing involved is proxy-situated. The question for embodiment is: do we make (at least some) use of the same mechanisms in reading about a rock climb as we do in executing it? (De Vega 2008: 185)

The tentative answer of course is yes: in reading we employ similar cognitive processes as in the actual act. Mirror neurons are the obvious link between action perception and the event itself.

full effect. Timothy Costelloe and Ian Hacking see in Coetzee's literature an attempt to awake the sympathetic imagination in the reader, which they relate to Hume's "progress of sentiments" (Costelloe 2003: 128; Hacking 2000: 22). In a similar fashion, Gareth Cornwell enlarges the scope of what literature, in particular Coetzee's fiction, might be able to achieve, or at least might promote:

> What literature affords us above all is the opportunity to encounter other minds in their full complexity, to imagine and to empathize with a range of human thought and feeling that it is impossible for us to experience directly. If the ultimate goal of the humanities is full social justice, then a pre-requisite is a sufficient degree of objective self-awareness, of awareness of the extent of our own contingency, the extent to which our values and beliefs are historically and ideologically positioned (conditioned, determined)." (Cornwell 2005: 52)

Even though my arguments remains closer to the ground in proposing that Coetzee's fiction in a very special way allows for empathy to flourish – with a little help from mirror neurons – I cannot resist the temptation of imagining the larger impact and implications of this. Even the neurosciences, which will hopefully provide evidence for my speculation on the connection of reading and mirror neurons, seem to be aware of possible future benefits beyond the seeking of pure knowledge, as Decety and Batson state:

> Further studies are required to increase our knowledge about the various factors, processes and (neural and behavioral) effects involved in and resulting from the modulation of empathic responses. This knowledge will inform us how empathy can be promoted to ultimately increase humankind's ability to act in more prosocial and altruistic ways. (Decety/Batson 2009: 122)

## 1.8 Methodology of Reading - Coetzee's Fictions as Neuroscience Fictions

Fundamental similarities exist between Coetzee's narrative explorations and the assumptions made by the neurosciences about mirror neurons and their relation to empathy. Firstly, the focus on the body both in Coetzee's fiction (the notion of embodiment) and in the discourse of neuroscience (embodied cognition) emphasize the important role the body plays beyond being a host for our brain and our heart. In the same way that Coetzee's notion of embodiment is a prerequisite for the sympathetic imagination, the bodily perception is a prerequisite for the mirror neurons to be activated and incite a process of empathy.

Another vital aspect of both discourses is the encounter with the other and its reflection in the self. In Coetzee's fiction it supplies the testing ground for the effectiveness of the sympathetic imagination, at its best when it reaches epistemological boundaries. In the discourse of neurosciences the imagining of self (putting yourself into the position of the other) is differentiated from imagining the other (intuiting the position of the other while

maintaining the autonomy of the self). The first position leads to emotional contagion, whereas the second process allows for an empathetic approach. Perspective-taking informs the discourse of Coetzee's fiction as well as the discourse of neuroscience. In literary narrative, first-person and third-person perspectives are the two most readily available modes of approaching the other.

Having outlined the theoretical framework, based on the sympathetic imagination as described by Elizabeth Costello and on the research on mirror neurons and empathy, the challenge now lies in the application of these concepts to the literary prose of Coetzee. My readings of Coetzee's novels focus on the literary enactment of the sympathetic imagination and how its representations evoke empathy. The underlying hypothesis is that at different stages in Coetzee's literary career the sympathetic imagination plays out in a number of ways, developing towards increased complexity in its staging.

Psychologist Martin L. Hoffmann from New York University, who regards empathy as "the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible" (Hoffmann 2000: 2), offers a classification for the developmental process of prosocial behaviour and empathy,[43] identifying five variations of empathy. The first three resemble passive, involuntary affective responses resulting from mimicry (imitating the other's emotion), conditioning (learning from the other's response) and direct association (relating the other's emotional states to own experiences); these three are classified as "primitive" cognitive modes, acquired during infancy. The two "higher-order" cognitive modes are mediated association (relating to others through a second-hand account of emotional states) and role- or perspective-taking (taking another's perspective to relate to him) (Hoffmann 2008: 5).[44]

For us readers, Coetzee's fictions are exercises in the "high-order" cognitive modes of empathy, mediated association and perspective-taking. Coetzee's narrative style aligns us closely with the minds of the characters, almost forcing us to relate to their experiences, thereby inducing association mediated by literature. Within the framework of the narrative Coetzee repeatedly manipulates the reader into imagining or taking the perspective of either the protagonist or the others he encounters. In this process our engagement with the characters also involves "primitive" modes of empathy such as mimicry, conditioning and direct

[43] Drawing on three decades of research, Hoffmann published *Empathy and Moral Development – Implications for Caring and Justice* in 2000. For a concise summary see also Hoffmann 2001.

[44] Anita Nowak gives a more elaborate recapitulation of Hoffmann's modes of empathy. (Nowak 2011: 46) Hoffmann's classification corresponds with the dual-path theory of Joseph LeDoux concerning emotional learning. In brief: the "lower path" is based on early evolutionary neural components (sensoric thalamus and amygdala), whereas the "higher path" involves a processing of sensoric input in more recently developed cortical areas of the human brain (LeDoux 1998: 163ff; also von Schewe 2009: 91f).

association. In first-person narration especially, we co-experience events and thereby imitate the emotions the characters go through. The use of thematic repetition and variation, including reiterated text markers, conditions the reader's response to related events. And last but not least, the universal themes of violence, parenthood and desire offer plenty opportunities for direct association.

On the text level all modes of empathy are staged through the characters and the encounters they have. In my readings of the novels I pay close attention to the interactions of the characters as well as the reader's perspective and consequent involvement. The analyses of the technique by which the sympathetic imagination and empathy are staged in the novels of Coetzee provide a matrix of case studies that illuminates how the narratives foster both the sympathetic imagination and empathy of the reader.

### 1.8.1 Discovering Sympathetic Imagination and Empathy in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee

Reading Coetzee with a focus on the sympathetic imagination and empathy has certainly affected and transformed my reception and perception of his novels. Before that, I had a vague feeling or intuition that Coetzee's fiction was not as bleak and cold as perceived by many due to his fastidiously precise prose style that seemingly lacks warmth. Now, the entire atmosphere of the novels is showered in a warmer light. Where I had before seen the failure to connect, the failure to communicate, the failure of creating a bond, I now see characters reaching out to others, making an effort, seeking to embrace and be embraced. I am aware of the magnitude of this shift and urge any reader to also re-evaluate her or his previous readings.

Coetzee's early fiction relies heavily on first-person narratives, directing the reader's empathetic attention – attentiveness is another analogous procedure of literary and neuroscientific discourse – almost exclusively to the protagonists, with their relations to others as a complementary aspect of their self-constructed identities. The characters of the early novels and their solipsistic and idiosyncratic narratives illustrate how stunted the sympathetic imagination can become, but at the same time constitute a challenge for the reader to employ his own sympathetic imagination to empathetically approximate stony characters such as Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee (*Dusklands*, 1974), Magda (*In the Heart of the Country*, 1976), and the Magistrate (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1980). My analysis attempts to trace the narrative mechanisms by which the text manipulates our perception of the characters. On the one hand, the self-imaging of the characters, rhizomatic part of the

monologic structure of the narratives, reveals the attitudes of the characters towards themselves, allowing the reader to take part in the enacted self-perspective while remaining at a critical distance that enables cognitive empathy. On the other hand, the way the characters relate to others, both emotionally and physically, needs detailed attention, thus it can be shown how each character's sympathetic imagination strains to break free from the constraints in place. In this regard, there is a clear progression in the characters' efforts to free themselves. As Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee demonstrate the failure of the sympathetic imagination, and Magda resigns after a frustrated attempt of activating hers, the Magistrate is the first one to act out a sympathetic engagement with others, prompted by his own bodily experience of violence that shifts his perception from mediated association (related events) to direct association (experienced events) and prepares the ground for his sympathetic imagination to become effective and enable a more empathetic engagement with others. Tellingly, the Magistrate is presented in third-person narration, a shift that increases the distance between the reader and the related events, but, interestingly, this distance promotes the cognitive empathy of the reader. Furthermore, third-person narratives prime the reader's attention to the protagonist's relations to others, while still maintaining a close focus on the central consciousness of the main characters.

*The Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) again employs a third-person perspective, now with a shift to a non-position of marginalization. As opposed to the previous characters, none of which were particularly appealing, Michael K compels the reader to feel compassion or at least pity from the very beginning. How much we allow ourselves to be drawn into his world indicates the reach of our sympathetic imagination and the extent of our empathy. How Michael K relates to others is a lesson on human interaction, wherefore it will receive detailed attention.

*Foe* (1986), *Age of Iron* (1990) and *The Master of Petersburg* (1993) mark a significant shift in both themes and narrative presentation. While Coetzee continues to focalize the narrative through one central consciousness, both in first- and third-person narration, the social interactions and relations bear far greater weight than in the early novels. The self-imaging of the characters remains a significant factor for the empathetic engagement of the reader's sympathetic imagination with the protagonist. Utilizing the writer figures of Susan Barton, Elizabeth Curren and Dostoevsky (Elizabeth Costello continues this trend) to reflect on the creative writing process (a writer's responsibilities) and questions of authorship (a writer's authority), Coetzee introduces a more transparent metafictional discourse into his fiction. Whereas so far our attention was focused on the sympathetic imagination of the

characters and our response to them, the thematic shift incorporates the writer's perspective and the involvement of the writer's sympathetic imagination in the creative process.

The essay collection *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and the essay novel *Elizabeth Costello* (1997), both containing the chapters "The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and the Animals," have provided the backbone for my approach. The staging of the sympathetic imagination moves to the background for the sake of Costello's discourse on animal ethics; the later short story "As a Woman Grow Older" (2004) takes us deeper into the private life of Elizabeth Costello and experiments with the extensive use of dialogue (largely substituting narrative prose), but even here the sympathetic imagination is stunted by the double nature of Costello as author and character, undermining our encounter with her as character as well as her encounters with others.

*Disgrace* (1999) complements Costello's discourse on the sympathetic imagination, starts with illustrating the failure of David Lurie to empathetically engage with others, to then indicate an awakening of his sympathetic imagination. After *Age of Iron,* this is the second novel with a setting contemporary to its time of production. The theme of parenthood is again prominent and ultimately Lurie's daughter Lucy is one test case for David Lurie's awakening sensibilities. Lurie's way of relating to women changes significantly over the course of the novel and serves to indicate the progress of his sentiments. A close look at his attitudes towards and dealings with Soraya, Melanie and Lucy illuminates his shift of perspective. Lurie's encounters with animals and his creative invocation of Byron's mistress Teresa Guccioli are two further aspects reflecting his emotional growth and opening up.

*Slow Man* (2005) repeats a similar experiment. The aging man is now named Paul Rayment, who unlike Lurie is beyond actual seduction but still haunted by his desire. Paul Rayment's encounter with the blind woman Marianna constitutes a prime example of how our imagination is involved in shaping the encounters we make; my analysis will focus briefly on this scene.

Finally, the autobiographical fictions *Boyhood* (1998), *Youth* (2001), and *Summertime* (2009) present a complication insofar as the author chooses to engage with himself as a fictional subject, a constructed version of himself, as seen in retrospect. The author's sympathetic imagination is now redirected and applied to himself, with the reader as bystander and witness. The analysis will focus both on the self-imaging of Coetzee as well as on the encounters portrayed in the narratives. *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) complements the autobiographical fictions as it represents a comprehensive spectrum of opinions presented via the proxy JC; opinions we can easily imagine Coetzee subscribing to, whereas *Elizabeth*

*Costello* (1997) offers opinions less obviously identical with Coetzee's own. The use of a split-page technique in *Diary of a Bad Year* imitates musical polyphony in narrative and prepares the ground for the kaleidoscopic self-portrait presented in *Summertime* (2009). The five interviews, framed by Coetzee's diary entries, represent fictionalized self-perspectives presented in dialogue (with the fictional biographer Mr Vincent). They provide a polyphonic murmur with a multitude of perspectives which in turn create a multi-faceted image of the persona constructed by the author. It is not the encounters with others themselves, but their reported impressions of Coetzee which matter. *Summertime* constitutes Coetzee's self-application of the sympathetic imagination, who now embarks on a process of self-evaluation, a seemingly "endless cathartic exercise" (Julia in *Summertime*, Coetzee 2009: 59). Coetzee engages with himself in a mode of empathy, and even though the fractured self-portrait is far from favourable, it gives the author a new perspective onto himself. At the centre of my discussion of *Summertime* will be the analysis of its textual surface and how it affects the reader's and the author's sympathetic imagination. My close reading will be restricted largely to the interview with Julia. In the end, a short look at *The Childhood of Jesus* (2009) aims to show how the failure of the sympathetic imagination impoverishes social relations, spoiling for David and Simon the utopian community they encounter.

### 1.8.2 Levels of Analysis: Author, Character, Reader, and Critic

My analysis comprises various levels of textual experience. The author-text-reader matrix offers a number of ways of looking at the sympathetic imagination and empathy. Narrative perspective controls our access to characters and guides our attention.[45] This is initially reflected in the grammar of personal pronouns, as Carrol Clarkson has discussed in her original study *Countervoices* (2009):

> Using the linguistico-philosophical underpinnings of his fiction and critical essays as a starting point, the book [*Countervoices*] explores Coetzee's ethics of writing, which is perhaps most striking in its consideration of the grammar of subject positions: what is ethically at stake in the use of proper names, or in recourse to a first-person plural 'we', or in the projection of an implied second-personal 'you' through the very logic of literary address? What authorial commitments arise by writing in the first person, or in the third? Grammatical choices such as these frequently arise in Coetzee as having profoundly ethical ramifications – especially in relation to questions about the authority, and hence the responsibility, on the part of the writer." (Clarkson 2009: 2)

The responsibility Clarkson ascribes to the writer is shared by the reader, as he takes part in Coetzee's experiments: "Just as philosophers develop thought-experiments, Coetzee develops formal and literary ones, setting up various conditions of possibility within language for

[45] My understanding of narrative has been strongly influenced by Cohn 1978 and Fludernik 1996.

aesthetic play and therefore, contingently, for historical and ethical awareness." (Clarkson 2009: 13) The interplay of narrative and ethical awareness lies at the heart of how the sympathetic imagination is staged in the fictions of Coetzee.

### The Author's Sympathetic Imagination and Empathy

When Elizabeth Costello speaks of the sympathetic imagination, her speech is directed at an academic audience and the text addresses philosophers and poets, the former illustrating a failure of the sympathetic imagination (hampered by rationality), the latter illustrating the enactment of the sympathetic imagination supported by a strong notion of embodiment. In a subservient notion Costello urges the listeners to employ their sympathetic imagination (here in order to sympathize with animals). The framing narrative shows how her relationships with others (including her own son) lack warmth and reciprocity, seemingly contradicting her own proposal – or otherwise privileging animals over humans.

If we consider how the sympathetic imagination of an author might work, we depend on hints in his textual output. In the case of Coetzee, the fictional autobiographies offer an expedient vantage point for such an undertaking. In *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime* we can see how the sympathetic imagination of the author Coetzee is directed at his former selves, allowing the author to develop new forms of self-empathy. In his previous novels we only see the result of the author's application of his sympathetic imagination in the creation of his fictional characters. But with the introduction of writer figures (beginning with Susan Barton in *Foe*) and proxy personas (first Elizabeth Costello, then Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year*) into the narratives, and ultimately with the self-insertion into his fictions we gain deep insight into the creative writing process as reflected on within his fiction. This intense interrogation of authorship and narrative authority finally allows the author Coetzee to engage with himself empathetically.

### The Character's Sympathetic Imagination and Empathy

Whereas the author's sympathetic imagination becomes transparent only in his later fiction (1990 and after), the fictional characters' sympathetic imagination is repeatedly staged and highlighted throughout Coetzee's oeuvre. On the text level we can detect patterns that indicate a staging of moments when the characters employ their own sympathetic imagination in their encounters with others (and with themselves). We read about Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee and how they perceive others and how this reflects their own self-perception.

We read about Magda's and Michael K's struggle in either establishing a connection with others or escaping social conventions, and so on. All of Coetzee's characters offer a rich variety of material for a discussion of the sympathetic imagination and a potential empathetic engagement with others. The characters' encounters with others constitute a central concern of my readings of the novels.

### The Reader's Sympathetic Imagination and Empathy

> The waterskater or long-legged fly. An insect. The waterskater thinks it is just hunting for food, whereas in fact its movements trace on the surface of the pond, over and over, the most beautiful of all words, the name of God. The movements of the pen on the page trace the name of God, as you, watching from a remove, can see but I cannot. (J.M. Coetzee: *As a Woman Grows Older*, 2004)

The theological pathos aside, Coetzee here pinpoints how the reader is at an advantage in the reception of a text, the writing of which bears less revelation for the author than for the reader. This is related to Coetzee's general conception of writing as a creative process beyond the author's control; though of course Coetzee's tight management of form somewhat betrays this Barthesian proposition. Nonetheless, the reader, being at a remove from the actual site of production, does have the advantage of taking in the whole panorama of human portrayals in a spirit of responsiveness. The effect on the reader is difficult to generalize. As Wolfgang Iser (*The fictive and the imaginary: charting literary anthropology*, 1993) and Derek Attridge (*The Singularity of Literature*, 2004) have shown, the reader co-creates the fiction presented by the author, filling in gaps and creating an own mental representation of what the text depicts. How the sympathetic imagination of the reader responds to any given text will depend on his personality and experiences – most obviously a South African will have a privileged access to Coetzee's novels. The analysis presented in the following will reflect my personal reading responses, resulting from repeated readings of the novels and in-depth study of both Coetzee criticism and criticism on Coetzee.

### The Critic's Sympathetic Imagination and Empathy

Parts of my discourse may diverge from the neuroscientific approach by delving into broad analyses of character's attitudes and their interactions with others. However, these diversions are meant to contribute to the larger picture of how the sympathetic imagination is enacted in the fictions of Coetzee. Especially the discussion of the first three novels and their monolithic characters serves to show the ambivalence of acts of the sympathetic imagination, or rather the stalling of such acts. The isolated selves of Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee and

Magda in particular serve to illustrate how the reader's sympathetic imagination is challenged by the failure of the character's sympathetic imagination. With Michael K and the Magistrate – and the shift to third person narration – Coetzee presents to the reader less isolated characters, so that the challenge for the sympathetic imagination takes place both on the textual level as well as in the reader.

My readings have gained an almost cinematic quality, by choosing to see events in fast-forward or slow-motion mode, zooming in on faces and encounters, at times even trying to zoom inside the character's heads (herein lies one privilege of literature over film). This cinematic impression will be stronger when my argument follows the plot of the novel, less so when I highlight certain aspects and themes with little attention to the larger narrative context. To continue the cinema metaphor, my readings occur in the spirit of my sympathetic imagination and the resulting empathy, both of which create an empathetic lens that focuses on processes of the sympathetic imagination in Coetzee's narratives.

The interlocking of theoretical approach and textual analysis presents a number of challenges. There is no point at which one can say precisely that mirror neurons are activated by a text passage and trigger empathy. My close readings constitute an act of my sympathetic imagination in response to Coetzee's fiction. While the neuroscientific theoretical framework informs my assessment, I will avoid an all too technical application of its terminology in favour of an imaginative encounter with Coetzee's narratives and its characters.

In the first three novels my analysis focuses on the semantic fields of the "eyes", the "heart," and the "self". This is in part due to the monolithic self-narration of the characters, which lends more significance to their inner discourse than to their encounters with others. However, their attitudes towards others play into their construction of their own identities.

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, we find a shift towards a more specific reading of encounters. Both approaches, semantic and situational, are not exclusive to each other and can be productively combined. In most cases one criteria of significance is emotional intensity. This registers either in the characters themselves, in the staging of encounters, or in the reader's response. This approach is continued in chapters three and four. Chapter five is dedicated to the autobiographical fictions of Coetzee, which offer an interesting shift towards a more self-reflective application of the author's sympathetic imagination. In addition, a discussion of Coetzee's critical reflections on the genre of autobiography and on the confessional mode will precede the close readings of *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*. This self-application of the sympathetic imagination by Coetzee will be refracted in my sympathetic and empathetic readings of his self-representations.

# 2. The Early Novels (1974-1983)

## 2.1 The Sympathetic Imagination of the Unsympathetic

In the comparative analysis of the first three novels, and subsequently in the discussion of *Life & Times of Michael K*, I will outline the staging of a stunted sympathetic imagination and analyse the textual sites of empathy, attempting to map the moral development – or lack thereof –of the various characters and how this may trigger the reader's sympathetic imagination and his empathy.

In his early writing Coetzee focuses on individuals and their inner truths they struggle with and cannot fully attain. The novels examine the movements of the souls of the characters, or the lack of development in the hearts and minds. The metaphysical framework for Coetzee's writing about "matters of the heart" is far removed from positivist psychology, psychoanalysis and neurosciences, his concept points instead towards a religious understanding of the human being, with damnation and grace just around the corner; the "saving of the soul" becomes one central concern for many of Coetzee's characters – such as Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*. Despite this religious-spiritual undercurrent, Coetzee's analytical prose touches on aspects and terminologies of the before-mentioned areas of research, namely the language of neurosciences in regard to mirror neurons and empathy as articulated by Rizzolatti, Gallese, Decety, Zaboura, and Breithaupt (see chapter one). Whatever idea of humanity we prefer, the language of Coetzee is not restricted and dedicated to one particular discourse, and the religious implications are not more than an undertone of varying intensity. More importantly, his prose always cuts deep into the inner workings of the character's minds, hearts, and souls.

At the beginning, my readings will concentrate on the eyes, the exchanges of looks and glances, and also the closing of the eyes. The face is the primary site of empathy between humans, and the eyes in particular establish a connection between characters, prominently so on the cinema screen, but equally so in literature. The way Coetzee's characters regard the world and the people they encounter informs us about their attitudes. The way the encountered people regard Coetzee's characters informs us about their respective social position. The eyes and their gaze direct the attention, creating a joint attention including both the characters involved as well as the reader as external observer; a position that Breihaupt (see section 1.6) claims to be beneficial to the development of empathy.

The second category to be explored in my readings of the early novels is the "heart" as a seat of sympathy along with passions and desires. The characters wish to speak "from the heart," and their "hearts reach out" to others. The discourse on the heart in Coetzee's early fiction also exposes to the reader the inner life of the protagonists in its moral dimensions. In an essay about Musil Coetzee mentions Musil's artistic persona "Monsieur le vivisecteur,"[46] a title that also befits Coetzee. Coetzee lays bare the insides of his characters with clinical precision and displays the movements of their hearts for the reader to observe. The opening of their hearts serve as an indicator of how successful the protagonists have been in employing their sympathic imagination, and in awakening their empathetic capabilities.

The chapter will end with a separate discussion of *Life & Times of Michael K*. The narrative mode shifts and therewith the perspective the reader gets to inhabit. Michael K has often been characterized as deficient in intelligence, but a closer analysis of his mode of encounter will show the intelligent design behind his silence, which has been described by several critics as a mode of resistance.[47] In the reading presented here, Michael K is understood as reaching out, but with a frightened heart. His social isolation dates far back into his childhood, and the looks he has received and continues to receive from others have stabilized his isolation. Furthermore, Michael K and his stay on the farm are a first lesson in Coetzee's fiction on reducing ourselves to our animal bodies, an act of the imagination and of the body that Michael K nearly literally sets out to accomplish.

### 2.1.1 The Main Characters – Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee, Magda, the Magistrate, Michael K

Coetzee employs his sympathetic imagination (as expressed by Elizabeth Costello) already in his early novels and tests its limits. As readers we closely follow the footsteps of Jacobus Coetzee, Eugene Dawn, Magda, the Magistrate, and Michael K, co-inhabiting their

[46] „In his diaries he developed for himself the artistic persona of 'Monsieur le vivisecteur', one who explored states of consciousness and emotional relations with an intellectual scalpel." (Coetzee 2007) Mehigan in the context of his discussion of *Slow Man* comments: "Coetzee's project might be likened to that of the vivisector, of the surgeon who, with scalpel in hand, probes ever more deeply through layers of tissue in search of the affliction that has brought about the subject's suffering […]" (Mehigan 2011: 195)

[47] Stefan Helgesson in the conclusion of his 2004 study Writing in Crisis. Ethics and History in Gordimer, Ndebele and Coetzee notes:

It is also in my discussion of that [LTMK] book that the ethical significance of blankness is properly foregrounded as a mode of resistance – historically marked as post-colonial – to the appropriations of the imperial subject. Representation of difference is in this regard not viable, as the structures of representation elide difference once it is represented. Each narrative tends therefore to be most loyal to the notion of heterogeneity and difference in their moments of blankness. […] As aesthetic artefacts, the all participate in the successive dismantling of the authority of the Western subject by resituating, symbolically, the foundations of subjectivity as well as literary form. (Helgesson 2004: 239f)

physical spaces, their minds, and their hearts. With them we experience the "empathic unsettlement" of the protagonists, who all show symptoms of trauma in some form or other.[48] In the "Vietnam Project" (*Dusklands*, first section) we are confronted with the complicity of Eugene Dawn in the war efforts aimed at the subjugation of the Vietnam people, and witness the effects it has on him. Jacobus Coetzee, on the other hand, is explorer and conqueror, a perpetrator of colonial and imperialist violence. Kannemeyer acutely comments:

> In 'The Narrative' Coetzee would for the first and last time employ a speaker inflicting pain with violence and from a lust to power. In the novels to follow, as David Atwell points out, such characters would be the antagonists of the narrator. As against Jacobus Coetzee, the narrating Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* is the victim of pain, with her overbearing patriarchal father as the antagonist. (Kannemeyer 2012: 275)

In a similar vein, Peter McDonald characterizes Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn as one of the "pathological rationalists who attempt, without success, to redeem their solipsistic selves through horrifyingly savage acts of violence." (McDonald 2009: 307)

*In the Heart of the Country* and *Life &Times of Michael K* the inner life of victims is portrayed, once exemplified by the white female position of Magda (who is implicated in the colonial settler's scheme of domination but suffers from it and attempts to resist it), then by the – presumably 'coloured' – Michael K. After *Dusklands*, Coetzee's first novel, we witness a shift from perpetrator to victim. Both Magda and the Magistrate constitute a transitive middle ground between the position of a victim and a perpetrator; they are implicated in the hierarchical structures of settler-colonialism and patriarchy, but struggle to defy their position and the systematic violence and oppression involved. In a way they enunciate the position of the white liberal humanist faced with the decision of looking away (and enjoying the benefits) or taking action against the atrocities dealt out to the marginalized and oppressed.

Coetzee allows readers a close encounter with all his characters, and our sympathies are tested in each case – none of the characters are heroic and admirable, and thus an easy positive identification is prevented. While suffering from his mental isolation Eugene Dawn experiences a breakdown in which he stabs his own son with a pencil. Jacobus Coetzee gets lost in his raging retribution. With these two characters the reader will find it hard to sympathize, but Coetzee's text makes it nearly impossible not to engage with them and be empathetic towards them, even though they become instruments of violence and fail to connect with any respective other:

[48] Dominic LaCapra in his excellent 2001 study *Writing History, Writing Trauma* writes: "Being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call *empathic unsettlement*, which should have stylistic effects or, more broadly, effects in writing which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method." (LaCapra 2001: 41; emphasis added)

> Jacobus Coetzee fails because, paradoxically, his all-consuming advance into Africa eliminates everything outside of himself, destroying the limits which would allow the self to distinguish self from Other; Eugene Dawn fails as he is inevitably recaptured by the institutions embodying societal control. (Dovey 1998: 20)

Magda at least attempts to overcome her isolation, but in the end is bound to fail. The Magistrate presents a more ambivalent case. Here, the reader's judgment is suspended, waiting for the events to unfold. The obsession with the barbarian girl's wounds of torture allows for a reflection on his implication in the physical torture of prisoners of an authoritarian system, as well as an opening up of his empathetic faculties. The Magistrate experiences a desire to close the gap between him and the barbarian girl, but in the end the reader is left to judge the accomplishment.

In the private thoughts of the protagonists the reader can witness the perceptual boundaries engraved in their minds causing the failure of the sympathetic imagination. The complex portrayal of the characters does not avoid contradictions inherent in their narrated self-portrayal: 1) Dawn's cold rhetoric stands in contrast to his violent breakdown 2) Jacobus Coetzee's isolation contradicts his imagined superiority; as does his unreliable narration 3) Magda's unreliable narration and her meandering thoughtscape 4) Michael K's mental eloquence in contrast to his silences. Especially in the case of Magda, Coetzee presents such a variety of facets to the reader, that I find it tempting to label it cubist literature; alluding to Pablo Picasso's cubist technique in his portraits of Gertrude Stein, Dora Maar, Henry Kahnweiler, and others, where various perspectives are collapsed into one picture, resulting in a multi-fractured image.[49] Picasso had aimed at deconstructing the genre of the portrait to accommodate modern tendencies of art, more specifically the paradigms of cubism. Picasso's portraits no longer ennoble the portrayed person, but instead show him/her in their vast complexity by including a multitude of perspectives in one portrait, resembling the fractured identities present in all of us. Coetzee's style of characterization, particularly in the early novels, employs an analogous procedure in writing. There is no central authority that can give us readers the truth about the characters, their self-narration provides a multitude of facets instead, which create a fractured portrait of the protagonist. The autobiographical fiction *Summertime* employs a cubist approach again in the process of subverting and deconstructing the genre of autobiography.

### 2.1.2 I am I – Self-Imaging in the Early Novels

> I should like to be styled J.M. Coetzee on the title page. (Coetzee to Randall, 6 March 1974)

[49] Patrick Denman Flanery draws the same connection in his review of *Summertime* (Flanery 2009).

The first three novels contain more than two hundred sentences beginning with "I am…" The protagonists either attempt to assert their identities or to extend the metaphorical dimension of their self-interpretation. To give a first impression of their self-imaging I quote a few examples:

> I am the embodiment of the patient struggle of the intellect against blood and anarchy. I am a story not of emotion and violence […] but of life itself […]. (Eugene Dawn, DL 28)
>
> I am a transparent sac with a black core full of images and a gun." and "I am a tool in the hands of history. (Jacobus Coetzee, DL 79 and 106)
>
> I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside me, I signify something, I do not know what […]." (HOC 10)
>
> I am plainly not myself in as clear a way as I might wish." (HOC 62)
>
> I am I! (HOC 72, also 5 and 54)
>
> I am not simply one of the whites, I am I! I am I, not a people. (HOC 118)
>
> I am a blur, a voice, a smell, a centre of energy. (Magistrate, WFB 32)

Reading Cartesian existentialist philosophy into these statements would be highly misleading, not only in the light of Coetzee's later critique of rationality as expounded in *Elizabeth Costello*. The "pathological rationalists" (McDonald 2009: 307) Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee come closest to a Cartesian Ego, and their "solipsistic selves" fail to recognize the others as ends in themselves and remain isolated. All the characters in the early novels are willing themselves into being, in their own particular ways. The language of metaphors suits their desperate but futile search for the stable core of their self-fashioned identities. Teresa Dovey comments:

> The notion of saving the self works metaphorically to imply the achievement of identity. Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country*, asks: "How shall I be saved" (16), lamenting her inability, in the absence of an interlocutor, to transcend the endless duality of the intrasubjective imaginary relationship of self to self, expressed in her repeated statement, "I am I." (Dovey 1998: 23)

Magda's voice of doubt, with her unreliable narration and ambiguous self-characterization, unsettles the reader and stalls any premature judgment of her dilemma, since the unsure ontological footing of her narrative forces the reader to tread carefully in his assessment of Magda. Magda's insistent proclamation of her self endows her with a fool's sincerity.[50] The Magistrate is the first character in Coetzee's fiction that allows for positive identification, in spite of the self-indulgence in his narrative. He is also the first character who undergoes a moral transition in the course of his narrative. Magda rebelled against her static self, but in the end remains a prisoner of her time and place. Michael K rebels against his time and place, but, in the end, his journey leads him back to his starting point. All five characters in the early

[50] Cf. Erasmus of Rotterdam as discussed in Coetzee 1996: 83-103.

novels are strong projections of unitary selves, represented as fractured and multi-faceted beyond any simple "I am I".

### 2.1.3 Inhabiting the Narrative – Perspective-Taking in the Early Novels

The three first novels are presented as first person narratives in the present tense. The autodidactic narrators lend the texts a monologic quality, but as Dovey acutely observes, they "[…] are dialogic in a profound sense, engaging in a discursive confrontation with the discourses they inhabit." Dovey recognizes that "[w]hile they articulate a strong desire for a reciprocal speech from the victims of colonization and of apartheid, they do not imagine that they can fabricate, in a facile way, a cross-cultural dialogue within their own structures: they recognize that, if this kind of dialogue does ensue, it will have to be a product of their reception." (Dovey 1998: 27) The desire for reciprocity is strongly expressed by Magda and the Magistrate, but also features in the narratives presented in *Dusklands*. Even though Coetzee denies his early protagonists – and for all that matters, all later ones as well – and the reader a comforting exit strategy in regard to reciprocal engagement, Coetzee at least gives expression to the desire for a genuine connection with others. In regard to Eugene Dawn, David James observes:

> What sounds at first like an indulgent exercise in self-pathologization turns out to be a commentary on the need for such an exercise to be carried out in the first place. It's as though Dawn is standing at some distance from the subject of his own dissemination. (James 2011: 44).

The distance to the self can be observed in all the narrators of the first three novels – maybe less so in the case of the Magistrate, but even there we experience moments of self-reflection from a certain distance. In regard to patterns of empathy, this distance can be correlated to the "narrative blockades" postulated by Fritz Breithaupt, which he considers a prerequisite for empathy to be triggered and fully realized (see 1.6). These narrative shifts seem to take place within the narratives, but reach across the limits of the written page and out to the reader, who as an observer is more likely to develop empathy towards the protagonists because of their self-distancing.

Coetzee uses his protagonists as exclusive focalizers of the events in all his early narratives: we either share their present perspective or we share their reflections on the past. This narrative technique invites the reader to inhabit the characters, giving them access to an inside perspective of the focalizing consciousness in its embodied state, barring both author and reader from inhabiting any position in the text external to the featured character. Due to this exclusive intimacy the reader employs his sympathetic imagination and is lured into

engaging with the characters in an empathetic manner, sharing their feelings. On a formal level, one might engage with the complicated palimpsest of historical meanings and literary influences hidden in the multiple folds of the text, but more existentially we are confronted with mirror images of human consciousness, refracted through the narratives given to us by Coetzee. We might wonder in what form or genre these narratives address the reader. Are they statements of belief? Testimonials? Reports? The Magistrate asks himself about his own writing: "A testament? A memoir? A confession? A history of thirty years on the frontier?" (WFB 62) The narratives contain only singular markers that show they are addressing the reader; but the texts obviously reach out to us, and through his sympathetic imagination Coetzee has created characters that speak to us.

In the "Afterword" of "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," the second narrative of *Dusklands*, we read: "To understand the life of this obscure farmer requires a positive act of the imagination." (DL 109) In a similar vein, the first narrative of *Dusklands*, "The Vietnam Project," is preceded by an epitaph by the cold war strategist Herman Kahn, who applied 'game theory' to the cold war and its nuclear stand-off, that begins: "Obviously it is difficult not to sympathize […]" – the rest of the quote then takes a complicated turn. [51] The sympathy is directed at the "European and American audiences" and their disgust at the exhilaration of the fighter-bomber pilots over successful napalm bombings. Kahn continues to explain the US government's strategy to choose pilots who don't suffer from a moral conscience. The obvious victims in this scenario, the people of Vietnam, are not addressed, nor is sympathy directed towards the perpetrators. Instead, the audience that witnesses the conflict is addressed, and in turn the actions of the government are justified as being beyond moral codes of conduct. The question of responsibility is not broached by Coetzee here, but looms behind the text. The reader is now prepared for the complex moral scenarios surrounding Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, for he is aware of his own conflicted position as witness, albeit 'only' in the realm of fiction. Following Herman Kahn – something to avoid at all costs – we as readers deserve sympathy for witnessing the atrocities dealt out by the novel's protagonists, and the responsibility is delegated to the superstructure of some kind of empire, whose agents are driven by the hunger for conquest, only barely coming to any realization about the

[51] "Coetzee was disgusted by the sophistical justification for the continuation of the war formulated by Herman Kahn, a physicist who had earlier been involved in planning nuclear war and, as a founding member of the Hudson Institute, had done research into government policy and served as an advisor to the Department of Defence, In the book *Can We Win in Vietnam?*; which he published with a few colleagues, Kahn articulated and defended inhumane solutions to the war." (Kannemeyer 2012: 167) In a letter to Randall (Ravan Press) Coetzee provides the full reference of the source for this epigraph: Frank E. Armbruster, Raymond D. Gastil, Herman Kahn, William Pfaff & Edmund Stillman, Can We Win in Vietnam? London: Pall Mall Press, 1968: 10. (Coetzee 1998 [1974])

implications for their life paths. Coetzee opens his literary arena with a careful approach to individual perspectives and the scope of their inner life. “Obviously it is difficult not to sympathize […]” are the first words we read from the novelist Coetzee. As readers we are primed to observe our sympathies. With Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* this exercise is continued in a more private setting, but still embedded in a greater historical context, though the setting is far less clearly defined than it was in *Dusklands*. Horse wagons and airplanes indicate a fairly recent time, but other markers point to a rural place removed from modernity; Macaskill observes that “the novels action is only vaguely located around the turn of the century in a diction replete with anachronisms.” (Macaskill 1998: 72) Unlike the settings Eugene and Jacobus operate in, it is the family farm which constitutes the centre of Magda’s existence. Her narrative presents a female victim and her intimations of liberation and the resulting conflicts with the servants. The violence against her father and Hendrik’s rape of Magda might only be imagined, since Magda proves to be an unreliable narrator right from the beginning, empowered only in her function as narrator, but in her actions remaining trapped in her colonial scenario. In the third novel discussed here, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate presents us with a more complicated and ambiguous scenario. The Magistrate is the first character in the fiction of Coetzee going through a development. Confronted with the barbaric practices of imprisonment and torture enacted by Colonel Joll, emissary of the Third Bureau, the Magistrate recoils, and, realizing his complicity, turns his attention on one of the victims of torture, even developing a form of intimacy. After returning the barbarian girl her to her people, undertaking an arduous journey through a fantastic sequence of landscapes (marshes, a salt lake, a snowstorm, mountains), the Magistrate is branded as a traitor and is himself tortured. The reader accompanies the Magistrate on the journey his conscience takes, from silence to outrage to humility.

In all three novels the reader is confronted with complex portrayals of the central characters. The site of empathy lies in the encounters and character constellations, which the reader witnesses as a third party. In the now following analysis I will concentrate on a number of encounters, with special attention to facial expressions and exchanged looks and the eyes as a special site of co-recognition, a site of interpersonal exchanges, ideally a site of the reciprocal gaze. A second instance is formed by the attitudes towards animals and the use of metaphors of the self. I will finish with a closer look at the ‘language of the heart’ and how it reflects the inner life of the protagonists. Eugene Dawn’s crystal heart and his fascination with insects, Jacobus Coetzee’s butcher mentality and his empathy towards birds, Magda’s searching eyes, and the Magistrate’s longing heart are all subjects of Coetzee’s sympathetic

imagination, and all are qualified to awaken our sympathetic imagination and to engage us empathetically.

### 2.1.4 J.M. Coetzee's Speculative History – The Settings of the Early Novels

In all of his first three novels, *Dusklands* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1976), and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Coetzee engages in "speculative history" (Magda in HOC 19), creating complex characters in (pseudo-)historical settings: Eugene Dawn and the Vietnam War, Jacobus Coetzee and the early colonization of the Cape,[52] Magda in the later colonial context of the Cape, the Magistrate on the frontier of a fictional Empire, and lastly Michael K in apartheid South Africa. All of these settings can be traced back to the biographical stations of Coetzee's life, which shows his concern for his heritage and the history he comes from: "Coetzee's doing-writing, in other words – and in words other than those employed by most contemporary historians of South Africa – provides a compellingly important encounter with the time and place of its birth." (Macaskill 1998: 67)

While writing *Dusklands* and imagining Eugene Dawn sitting in a library, Coetzee was sitting in a library in the United States of America.[53] The character John in *Youth* – who we can fairly presume to concur with the author Coetzee to a large degree – resigns from IBM shortly after discovering their involvement in a military project in the context of the Cold War. In Austin, Texas, Coetzee experienced an eruption of irrational violence when Charles Joseph Whitman, perched on the upper deck of the campanile, killed and wounded a number of people. Coetzee was at the time teaching a course in the same building complex. While writing *Dusklands* Coetzee also became witness to the protests against the war in Buffalo, where he was a lecturer at the time; the protest he took part in was rather against the conduct of the university administration, who had called for a strong police force to occupy the campus, than directly against the war – but one can fairly assume he was sympathetic to the students' cause.[54] Jacobus Coetzee's and Magda's narratives deal with the conflicted historical

[52] For his first novel Coetzee draws on historical sources he discovered in the library of the university in Austin: "The 1799 edition of *The Journal of Hendrik Jacob Wikar* includes the short account of a journey undertaken by Jacobus Coetzé in 1760 along the West Coast and through Namaqualand to the Orange River and beyond, an account that would form the basis of the second part of Dusklands, Coetzee's first novel, which he was shortly to commence." (Kannemeyer 2012: 159)

[53] Kannemeyer once again points out a link to Coetzee's own biography: "When not having to attend or give classes, Coetzee spent his days in Austin's spacious library. Some years later, in the first part of *Dusklands*, he describes Eugene Dawn working in the basement of a library, and it is not far from the bookish Coetzee's own experience." (Kannemeyer 2012: 157)

[54] For a detailed account of this episode see Kannemeyer 2012: 159-162; also Scott 1997: 86. Kannemeyer's biography also features a satirical essay by Coetzee on the Vietnam war printed in the *Daily Texan* in Austin. Kannemeyer further makes available a blurb Coetzee himself had written for the publication by Ravan Press:

past of Coetzee's home country, South Africa; the former being written together with Eugene Dawn's narrative in the US, the latter being mainly written after his return to South Africa. In *Life & Times of Michael K* Coetzee explores a virtual present time, South Africa in a state of emergency similar to how it was when the book was written in the 1980s.[55] Coetzee's characters are placed in their historical contexts and exposed to its contingencies. The realization how history has shaped their being rests with the reader and occurs to the characters only in brief flashes of insight, none of which they manage to hold on to. Engaging in speculative history frees Coetzee from the constraints of historical accuracy, and gives space to the unfolding of complex characters. Correspondingly, Macaskill sees Magda's narrative as an act of "speculative linguistics" with Coetzee as *scripteur*, as an agent behind the voice of Magda: "Coetzee writes Magda into being both as a 'real' person and as paper entity, shaping her – and allowing her to shape herself – between the demands of the verisimilitude valued by historical materialism and the discursive play practiced by poststructural theories of language." (Macaskill 1998: 73) On a more pragmatic level, Magda is placed "between the two natural languages that articulate her and that she articulates, English and Afrikaans." (Macaskill 1998: 73) As we know from *Boyhood* (and Kannemeyer), Coetzee himself grew up with a similar tension between English and Afrikaans. Brian Macaskill goes on to argue that Magda desires to find a middle ground and escape the history that restricts and stunts all intersubjective relations available to her:

> Here [HOC 133] Magda expresses – in writing – her hope of being a middle voice, her desire to write herself into a new existence, to escape the "old locutions" that have forced her to veer to and from the "master-talk" between mistress and servants and alternate attempts at intimate chatter with Anna and Hendrik. (Macaskill 1998: 76)

The allegorical nature of Coetzee's early novels in particular has been discussed widely, and the vague settings invite allegorical readings.[56] The universal character of the narratives can hardly be denied, but the specific allegorical framework depends largely on the reader. The South African reader will most likely relate Coetzee's fictions to the landscape and social climate surrounding him, whereas the non-African reader might relate *Waiting for*

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In the Vietnam Project and The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee we visit the dead souls of the explorers, conquistadors, and administrators whose work it is, in 1970 as in 1760, to absorb the wilds into the Western dusklands. Is it contempt for their victims, or is it fear of the damage that love may do to the screens of abstraction through which they see the world, that makes them monsters of callousness? Are they simply the barbarians of 'progress,' or are they creatures of the apocalypse determined to involve mankind in their personal damnation? (Kannemeyer 2012: 247)

[55] "If it [LTMK] is set ahead in time at all, then this is done as a way of looking, as if it had come to the surface, at what lies under the surface of the present. The harried homelessness of Michael K and his mother is the experience, in 1984, of hundreds of thousands of black people in South African squatter towns and "resettlement" camps. A civil war is going on in 1984 on South Africa's borders, between black and white […]." (Gordimer 1998: 141)

[56] See Attridge 2006a. See also Dovey 1988.

*the Barbarians* more readily to the Russian or Chinese Empires than to South Africa. The allegorical reading ultimately rests with the reader.

## 2.2 From Imperial Gaze to Sympathetic Gaze

The face is the primary site of emotional display. Babies pick up the expressions from their parents, learn to interpret them, learn to mimic them and thereby indicate and communicate their emotional states. In encountering others the eyes play a vital part – be it in the sense of a stare contest (think of Western movies) or the sympathetic gaze of lovers (think of your own experiences or again: movies). Some characters of Coetzee's novels speak of the eyes as the "windows of the soul," and in the early novels the eyes of the protagonists are ascribed a variety of metaphorical meanings, all reflecting on how they approach others. This will be the first category of analysis of Coetzee's first three novels.

### 2.2.1 The Imperial Gaze in *Dusklands* (1974)

#### Eugene's pornographic gaze of penetration

Eugene Dawn's primary mode of engagement is that of penetration, be it the penetration of Vietnamese minds through radio propaganda, or his pornographic gaze penetrating pictures of torture. Eugene suffers from bodily spasms, and Coetzee creates a very detailed corporal representation of Eugene's troubles, of which the following quote gives a good impression:

> Hemmed in with walls of books, I should be in paradise. But my body betrays me. I read, my face starts to lose its life, a stabbing begins in my head, then, as I beat through gales of yawns to fix *my weeping eyes* on the page, my back begins to petrify in the scholar's hook. […] Behind my temples too, behind my cheekbones, behind my lips *the glacier creeps inward toward its epicenter behind my eyes*. My eyeballs ache, my mouth constricts. If this inner face of mine, this vizor of muscle, had features, they would be the monstrous troglodyte features of a man who bunches his sleeping eyes and mouth as a totally unacceptable dream forces itself into him. (DL 7, emphasis added)[57]

Embodied Eugene's weeping eyes, here a physiological rather than a metaphorical phenomenon, are an indicator of his inner state. A photography of Eugene shows an earlier self with "liquid brown eyes" (13), but he characterizes his current state as an inner "frozen sea", a recurring trope in Coetzee's fiction (recently in *Summertime*, page 61), signalling isolation and the inability to engage with others. He keeps various photos of scenes of prisoners, torture and other atrocities. One picture in particular fascinates him, a still from a

[57] Coetzee 1998 [1974]. All quotes in section 2.2.1 will be from DL unless indicated otherwise.

movie. In his description of the movie itself, Eugene mentions "the eyes of prisoners," and when the camera focuses on one prisoner: "The man in the cage turns languid eyes on us." (16) Eugene responds to this gaze with pornographic excitement:

> I have a 12" x 12" blowup of the prisoner. He has raised himself on one elbow, lifting his face toward the blurred grid of the wire. Dazzled by the sky, he sees as yet only the looming outlines of his spectators. His face is thin. From one eye glints a point of light; the other is in the dark of the cage.
> I have also a second print, of the face alone in greater magnification. The glint in the right eye has become a diffuse white patch; shades of dark gray mark the temple, the right eyebrow, the hollow of the cheek.
> I close my eyes and pass my fingertips over the cool, odorless surface of the print. Evenings are quiet here in the suburbs. I concentrate myself. Everywhere its surface is the same. The glint in the eye, which in a moment luckily never to arrive will through the camera look into my eyes, is bland and opaque under my fingers, yielding no passage into the interior of this obscure but indubitable man. I keep exploring. Under the persistent pressure of my imagination, acute and morbid in the night, it may yet yield. (16-17)

His gaze is that of penetration, not of a sympathetic engagement. Later in the narrative he recalls the prisoner's gaze and imagines a gesture of awakening sympathy: "The man in the tiger cage flashes a black eye at me. I stretch out my hand." (34) Eugene has his moments of realization, of which I will give one example:

> There is no doubt that I am a sick man. Vietnam has cost me too much. I use the metaphor of the dolorous wound. […] Inside my body, beneath the skin and muscle and flesh that drape me, I am bleeding. […] I imagine a wound weeping somewhere in the cavern behind my eyes. (32)

His realizations, however, are only momentary, not followed up, without consequences. Eugene Dawn remains a static self, unable to gain a fresh perspective, even though perspective-taking plays a role both in his work life and his personal life. Tellingly, Eugene Dawn employs his empathetic capabilities solely for the purpose of dominating the other; whereas towards his family these faculties remain dormant. When he speaks of the alienation from his wife, he comments: "As an exercise I watch her through a strange man's eyes. New perspectives excite me." (11) The exercise of perspective-taking reaches an extreme, and Eugene Dawn loses himself in the other's perspectives, failing to relate them back to his self and his attitudes towards others:

> What sounds at first like an indulgent exercise in self-pathologization turns out to be a commentary on the need for such an exercise to be carried out in the first place. It's as though Dawn is standing at some distance from the subject of his own dissemination. (James 2011: 44).

The distance to himself is the tragic flaw of Eugene Dawn's self-appraisal. In terms of the sympathetic imagination, he only completes the first level, the task of thinking himself into others, but fails in relating the gained insight to his own self.

In the end Eugene rejects the explanations of his pathological state offered by his wife Marilyn, that his "human sympathies have been coarsened, […] and [he] ha[s] become addicted to violent and perverse fantasies." (9). Marilyn's friends speak of "psychic brutalization" (9), and the doctors also deliver a plausible rationalization: "The hypothesis they test is that intimate contact with the design of war made me callous to suffering and created in me a need for violent solutions to problems of living, infecting me at the same time with guilty feelings that showed themselves in nervous symptoms." (48) Instead of considering these answers, Eugene Dawn ends his narrative with a question that externalizes the responsibility for his doings: "I have high hopes of finding whose fault I am." (49)

### Jacobus Coetzee: Penetration and Domination

> I am in two minds about supplying the particular personal information you suggest, not because I am at all against idle curiosity, and not either because I think the facts of a writer's background irrelevant to his work (they are and they aren't), but because the information you suggest suggests that I settle for a particular identity I should feel most uneasy in. A few words about my schooling, for example, make me a player in the English-South African game of social typing and can even be read as a compliment to those monsters of sadism who ruled over my life for eleven years. As for my family background, I am one of 10,000 Coetzees, and what is there to be said about them except that Jacobus Coetzee begat them all? (Coetzee to Randall, 17 January 1974)

Jacobus Coetzee follows a similar path as Eugene Dawn, only about two centuries earlier in the Cape region of imperial conquest, and in a more active mode of penetration: "I meditated upon the acres of new ground I had eaten up with my eyes." (77) And later: "The Hottentots knew nothing of penetration. For penetration you need blue eyes." (96-97) He expands the metaphor of the "eating eyes" penetrating the wilderness in his discourse:

> Only the eyes have power. The eyes are free, they reach out to the horizon all around. Nothing is hidden from the eyes. As the other senses grow numb or dumb my eyes flex and extend themselves. *I become a spherical reflecting eye moving through the wilderness and ingesting it.* Destroyer of the wilderness, I move through the land cutting a devouring path from horizon to horizon. There is nothing from which my eye turns, I am all that I see. Such loneliness! Not a stone, not a bush, not a wretched provident ant that is not comprehended in this travelling sphere. What is there that is not me? I am a transparent sac with a black core full of images and a gun. (79, emphasis added)

The spherical eye – one might be reminded of Foucault's analysis of Jeremy Bentham's prison designs, his *panopticon*[58] – incorporates the outside world; in the *Afterword* it is referred to as "the spherical eye of a frog or toad" (109). Perspective-taking hardly figures in the narrative of Jacobus Coetzee. In contrast to Eugene Dawn, who lacks an own perspective properly

[58] Bentham 1995.

related to his self, Jacobus Coetzee raises his perspective to be his ultimate reasoning, similar to the eye of God (cf. the eye within a triangle in freemason insignia or the US dollar bill).[59]

In his first encounter with the Nama people Jacobus is cautious, but rather for fear than for curiosity. Only later, after he has been violated and humiliated, does he question himself: "With what new eyes of knowledge, I wondered, would I see myself when I saw myself, now that I had been violated by the cackling heathen. Would I know myself better?" (97) We get a sense that Jacobus Coetzee has potential to engage with others, maybe on the not completely infertile ground of his life-long companionship with his servant Klawer, but the master-servant divide remains intact up to the last moment when he leaves him behind on his trek home. The report of the second expedition nullifies any potential for an engaging approach, instead he and his party annihilate all others, leaving only the solitary self of Jacobus Coetzee behind.

### 2.2.2 *In the Heart of the Country* (1976): Blank Mirror Images of the Mind

In contrast to the male protagonists of *Dusklands*, Magda's sense of self is far more fragile and less self-assertive. In a sense she resembles a historical descendant of Jacobus Coetzee, who observed: "Our children play with servants' children, and who is to say who copies whom? In hard times how can differences be maintained?" (DL 57) Magda follows: "I grew up with the servants' children. I spoke like one of them before I learned to speak like this." (HOC 6)[60] and reflects on her ancestry: "[…] why did he [her grandfather] pass on no humanity to my father but leave him a barbarian and me too after him? (46) […] the mark that has been left on me instead is the mark of intercourse with the wilds, with solitude and vacancy." (47)

In Magda we can see the failure of her sympathetic imagination, and consequently her failure to empathize with Hendrik and Klein-Anna. While on the textual level a failure of the sympathetic imagination is enacted, we as readers are challenged to employ our sympathetic imagination while encountering Magda together with all her contradictions, all unreliably

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[59] Rukmini Bhaya Nair in her excellent study on *Narrative Gravity* comments on the search for a 'true self", here in relation to Virginia Woolf:

> Where Woolf poetically enquires: *Is this the true self, which stands on a pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here or am I there?* Dennett would deny the validity of this question. For, in his scheme of things, there is no 'true self"; there is no real centre of 'selfhood'. Paradoxically, though, our *stories help us imagine a centre*. This imaginary centre is the object we take to be, through a series of inspired references, an agentive human self, 'a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye'. (Nair 2003: 205-206; original emphasis)

The spherical eye of Jacobus Coetzee constitutes such an imaginary centre.

[60] Coetzee 1982 [1976]. All quotes in section 2.2.2 will be from HOC unless indicated otherwise.

narrated by her. Whether the text enables us to feel empathy for Magda cannot be answered conclusively, but she seems to remain closed to us. However, accompanying her on the wild journey of her imagination brings us closer to her during the course of her narrative – never do we get a full picture, but even the fragments (that offer more numerous access points for our imagination than a more coherent portrayal would) offered can stimulate our sympathetic imagination and elicit empathy.

*In the Heart of the Country* takes the reader on a journey into the innermost recesses of a mind, a place without certainty but instead a world of 'perhaps'.[61] Not only are we invited to see what Magda (identified in name only late in the narrative) sees, inhabiting her perspective, but as readers are also challenged by the multiplicity of events. The reiterated 'perhaps' clause creates a distance to the events, since we cannot know for sure whether they are really taking place. The very first series of events, opening the narrative – "Today my father brought home his new bride." (1) – is immediately renounced and discarded. The numbering of the sections from 1. to 266., which in their length range from one paragraph to one or two pages, structures the narrative and on the one hand suggests a chronological order, but on the other in its numerical expression suggests exchangeability and a contingent sequence of events.

Magda creates her own narrative and proves to be an exemplarily unreliable narrator. This unreliability and the discourse on her unstable identity point to a discourse on madness (maybe schizophrenia – Donald Powers, UCT, in this context playfully suggested the alternative term "the symptomatic imagination").[62] In her eyes, she is never on equal terms with the other:

> I create myself in the words that create me, I who have lived among the downcast have never beheld myself in the equal regard of another's eye, have never held another in the equal regard of mine. While I am free to be I, nothing is impossible. In the cloister of my room I am the mad hag I am destined to be. … to the crazy hornpipe I dance with myself. (8)

The "equal regard of another's eye" points to the dominating presence of her father and to the servility of the domestic workers. Magda's position keeps the middle ground, with no common ground available in regard to both father and workers. Macaskill discusses how language is "a social fact embedded within ideological matrices" and how the modulations Magda performs with her matrix parody the "hierarchy," the "distance and perspective"

[61] "'Perhaps' is one of the text's most prevalent terms. It occurs no less than eleven times, for instance, in two passages that total only twenty lines in section 149 of the novel (79-80)." (Macaskill 1998: 82)
[62] For a more detailed discussion of the psychological dimension of Magda's characterization, see Briganti 1998. For a follow-up on Donald Power's comment see Cheney 2009.

evoked by it "as the 'father-tongue' slurs and distance diminishes" (Macaskill 1998: 76). Magda searches for "a middle locution between active and passive", desires to be a median. The use of the middle voice occurs not only on the level of character, but also on the formal level of the text: "[T]he numbered entries in which she seeks to record this articulation come in turn to constitute Coetzee's act of 'doing-writing' in the middle voice: a means, no less, of enumerating (for Coetzee) equally complex negotiations facing the writer at that time and place of contemporary South Africa (Macaskill 1998: 77). The middle voice allows Magda to avoid placing herself on either side of the dichotomies of master-slave relations, but precisely this constitutes her insecurity and the instability of her position.[63]

Chiara Briganti discusses Magda's position as a female subject and observes that "she is reduced to being only the other term of the dyad, only the father's opposite." (Briganti 1998: 89) Simultaneously, the "inscription of the female subject demystifies authorial identity by questioning the legitimacy of the father/author as locus of authority and begetter of texts […]" (Briganti 1998: 85) Her "self-representations also show Magda as engaged in a masquerade that enables her to parody the male gaze and those images that are seen culturally through men's eyes, and also show her remarkable capacity for self-regeneration." (Briganti 1998: 86-87) The female subject constitutes a site of resistance, but her resistance shows few positive results apart from the demise of the father.

Magda's mode of communication never seems adequate. The silence between her and her father (only once in the entire novel does actual dialogue occur between them) is symptomatic, and even their eyes do not speak to each other: "We look at each other. Try as I will, I cannot work out what feelings his face expresses. I lack the faculty of reading faces." (65) Even when assuming that the father's face might not be an ideal site to study emotional expressions, the deficiency Magda expresses here indicates a failure of empathy; or more precisely, an underdeveloped state of her mirror neurons.

Her communication with the servants Hendrik and Klein-Anna starts off with a language of hierarchy, of imperatives: "I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak, I feel too much the pathos of its distances, but it is all we have. I can believe there is a

[63] "[The middle voice's] capabilities of putting thought into place between the disjunctive logic of dichotomous options is suggestive not only in the context of Magda's project but –more crucially –reveals also the import of Coetzee's "doing-writing," in which Magda functions only as a cipher, albeit a central one. Magda's act of writing, which she herself recognizes as taking place in the modality of "an eternal present" that forever distinguishes it from history and even from story (114[115]) and that aligns it instead to the temporal and self-referential vagaries of the middle-voice writing, […]" (Macaskill 1998: 77) For a more elaborate discussion of Coetzee's use of the middle voice see also Dovey 1998; for a more general discussion of the middle voice in the context of trauma see LaCapra 2001.

language lovers speak but cannot imagine how it goes." (97) Later she makes an effort to engage with Hendrik and Klein-Anna on more equal terms, but the communication is stunted:

> I am spoken to not in words, which come to me quaint and veiled, but in signs, in conformations of face and hands, in postures of shoulders and feet, in nuances of tune and tone, in gaps and absences whose grammar has never been recorded. Reading the brown folk I grope, as they grope reading me: for they too hear my words only dully, listening for those overtones of the voice, those subtleties of the eyebrows that tell them my true meaning: "Beware, do not cross me," "What I say does not come from me. Across valley of space and time we strain ourselves to catch the pale smoke / of each other's signals. (7-8)

Communication primarily takes place through the body, not through the words uttered. This foregrounding of the body as a site of communication establishes an alternative to purely verbal communication on a semantic level. Not a lack of vocabulary, but a fundamental gap configured through the social environment, prevents any sincere exchange of words. The signs of the bodies are the only reliable indicators left for communication.

The category of voice presents an interesting case in *In the Heart of the Country*. Magda's narrative alludes to a variety of philosophical contexts that seem at odds with her situation and up-bringing – she was schooled in a shed (45-47). Two prominent examples are Blake and Nietzsche. Macaskill notes a "pervasive pressure of allusions to and direct quotations from the work of William Blake throughout the text" (Macaskill 1998: 83), and characterizes this disjunction well:

> The contradiction that emerges between the characterization of Magda and the intellectual qualities and qualifications of the voice in which she speaks underscores the extent to which Magda's narrative is not only Magda's narrative but also an act of "speculative linguistics" on the part of Coetzee, scripteur, who is inscribed within the writing and who acts as its agent. Coetzee writes Magda into being both as a "real" person and as paper entity, shaping her – and allowing her to shape herself – between the demands of the verisimilitude valued by historical materialism and the discursive play practiced by poststructural theories of language. (Macaskill 1998: 73)

Again, Coetzee's treatment of the character Magda attains a high degree of complexity, which serves not only her portrayal but also on a formal level implies the author's voice and marks his interference with her identity construction. In the South African edition of *In the Heart of the Country* large parts of the dialogue are presented in Afrikaans, placing Magda "between the two natural languages that articulate her and that she articulates, English and Afrikaans" (Macaskill 1998: 73); reminiscent of Coetzee's own position of having an Afrikaner father and a mother strongly affiliated with English culture and language.

The eyes of Magda make more *empathetic noise* (see Breithaupt in 1.6) than her verbal communication, and she speaks of "the wind that roars in the spaces between the atoms of my body, whistles in the cavern behind my eyes." (56) In the same space Eugene Dawn imagined "a wound weeping" (DL 32, see also above), and later in *Foe* a roaring wind will emit form

the mouth of Friday. In the case of Eugene, his inner self cries over the experienced isolation from others, in the case of Magda the "wind" signals the emptiness of her inner life, though at the same time the wind indicates movement and possible transformation. The roar coming from Friday's mouth breaks his silence, but points beyond his individual fate and attests a shift in Coetzee's fiction and its themes (see section 3.1.5).

**The Lighthouse**

Where Jacobus Coetzee resembled an all-seeing "spherical eye" in his conquest, Magda's viewpoint, though still in the mode of the overseer, is elevated and opens the possibility of a more searching than dominating mode:

> […] I have quite another sense of myself, glimmering tentatively somewhere in my inner darkness: myself as a sheath, as a matrix, as protectrix of a vacant inner space. I move through the world not as a knifeblade cutting the wind, or as a tower with eyes, like my father, but as a hole, a hole with a body draped around it, the two spindly legs hanging loose at the bottom and the two bony arms flapping at the sides and the big head lolling on top. I am a hole crying to be whole. (40-41)

Magda here attributes the lighthouse metaphor to her father (cf. Jacobus as spherical eye), but in an earlier thought seems to compare herself with a lighthouse: "Inside my skull the walls are glassy, I see only reflections of myself drab and surly staring back at myself." (38) Her eyes are searchlights that sweep over her surroundings in great circles; Magda imagines fixing her gaze on Klein-Anna:

> I have only, I tell myself, to throw off the straps and haul on the lever ready to my hand for the cogs to stop grinding and the light to fall steady on the girl, her slim arms, her slender body; but […] the beam swings on, and in a moment I am watching the stone desert or the goats or my face in the mirror, objects on which I can happily release the dry acid breath I have held back so painfully, breath that is, I cannot after all deny it, my spirit, my self, or as much so as the light is. (26)

Her eyes search the human landscape, sending out light in a desire for contact, a relief from isolation. But her desire remains detached. Admittedly, this reading is reductive, and Magda resists singular characterization through one master metaphor: "[…] I am more than just […] a streak of light against the void of space, a shooting-star […]." (56) The contradictions inherent in her discourse support this resistance, and allow her to say:

> I am not a principle, a rule of discourse, a machine planted by a being from another planet on this desolate earth beneath the Southern Cross to generate sentiments day after day, night after night, keeping count of them as I go, until I run dry. (120)

**Eyes Wide Shut**

Taking a step back, it is important to register how "closed eyes" figure in her case. The closing of the eyes indicates a blocking out of the outside world, and can also indicate an

opening of the unconscious, the world of thoughts that is hidden within (a trope that keeps reappearing in Coetzee's fiction). When she tries to protect Klein-Anna from Hendrik's jealous reprise, he pushes her to the ground: "The blood thuds in my ears. I close my eyes: in a moment I will be myself." (76) Here the idiomatic meaning of collecting oneself overshadows the metaphorical implication of returning to the self (from somewhere other). With closed eyes she opens herself to the forces and impulses of her unconscious. Tellingly, this occurs again in the moment when she points a gun at her sleeping father: "I am not bad, I am not even dangerous. I close my eyes and pull the trigger. I am stunned and deafened, there is a ringing in my ears." (99) Closing her eyes enables Magda to focus on her inner self, and ultimately to partially set it free.

**Open Your Eyes**

Returning to the metaphor of the lighthouse and Magda's search for human contact, the reader cannot miss the efforts she makes to reconcile herself with the servants, in part out of necessity, but also with great curiosity. Compared to her relationship with her father Magda suspects a far more genuine tie between the servants: "[…] if not acute ecstasy then at least a kind of gentle streaming of radiance from eyes and fingertips which I do not see […]." (78) Before her father is removed from the picture she maintains the "traditional distance" (25). After having disposed of him she engages more openly with the servants, but the master-servant gulf ultimately cannot be bridged and in the end the servants leave her behind on the farm, alone. Toward the close of the narrative, her father reappears on the scene, now lifeless and quite likely no more than a decaying corpse (perhaps a moment of necrophilia, though some have read it as a return in full blood in accordance with the mode of 'perhaps' and her unreliable narration). In the context of my argument, it is interesting to observe her trying to make eye contact with her (now dead) father:

> His eyes are sightless, two glassy blue walls rimmed with pink. He hears nothing but what goes on inside him, unless I am mistaken all this time and he hears all my chatter but chooses to ignore it. He has had his outing for the day; it is time to carry him in so that he can rest. (137)

Just like her father (the fact that she intends to "carry him in" indicates either extreme frailty or the lightness of a dried-up corpse), Magda cannot establish a connection with the others around her, and thereby remains in her isolated position, a clearly unfavourable state which reflects badly on her: "I look at myself in the mirror and try to smile. The face in the mirror smiles a haggard smile. Nothing has changed. I still do not like myself." (96)

Similar to Eugene Dawn, who claims to be interested in explanations of his own being – though he rejects any explanations offered to him – Magda also seems to refuse the possibility of an explanation of herself:

> I am beyond the why and wherefore of myself. […] The woman in the nightcap watching me from the mirror, the woman who in a certain sense is me, will dwindle and expire here in the heart of the country unless she has at least a thin porridge of event to live on. I am not interested in becoming one of those people who look into mirrors and see nothing, or walk in the sun and cast no shadow. (23)

Magda senses a self she cannot reach. Her fears expressed in this passage allude to the undead, more specifically to vampires, who have no mirror image, and to the *doppelganger*, taking over the self and misrepresenting him.

Later, however, she offers a fairly plausible explanation (and thereby probably oversimplified) explanation:

> Is it possible that there is an explanation for all the things I do, and that that explanation lies inside me, like a key rattling in a can, waiting to be taken out and used to unlock the mystery? Is the following the key: through the agency of conflict with my father I hope to lift myself out of the endless middle of meditation on unattached existence into a true agon with crisis and resolution? (62)

Ultimately Magda reaches no conclusion and her sense of confusion, expressed early on in the narrative, never really leaves her:

> I am lost in the being of my being. This is what I was meant to be: a poetess of interiority, an explorer of the inwardness of stones, the emotions of ants, the consciousness of the thinking parts of the brain. It seems to be the only career, if we except death, for which life in the desert has fitted me. (35)

Magda's despair results largely from the double bind of the master-slave dialectic controlling her fate; as a colonial subject she occupies the position of master, as female subject she might not quite be a slave, but not far from it. Her quest for redemption is more explicit than Eugene Dawn's curiosity about whose fault he is.

### 2.2.3 *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980): Dark Eyes of Interrogation, Bright Eyes of Benevolence

*Waiting for the Barbarians* has a far more cinematic scope than the chamber pieces *In the Heart of the Country* or Eugene Dawn's account. I have in mind the style of a Western with a gory visual representation of torture (Werner Herzog attempted a screenplay, which might have developed in such a direction, but unfortunately it never materialized). In its setting it is comparable to Jacobus Coetzee's narrative, but far more epic in its scope and more complex in the constellation of characters.

Coetzee gives us a conversion narrative. The Magistrate starts out as a bureaucrat of the empire with little else in mind than his everyday comforts. At the close of the novel, the Magistrate has changed considerably. At the moral centre of the narrative lies "the mutilated body under a postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion." (Samolsky 2003: 117) In the beginning, the barbarian girl is tortured (and other prisoners too; off-scene), later the Magistrate himself is subjected to torture (on-scene).[64] Her torture took place in a dark chamber, while the Magistrate's humiliation happens in public.[65] Marais comments:

> While this character is aware of his location in the society he resists, and *must* therefore doubt the motives behind his actions, he is nonetheless obliged to act by his encounters with the indubitable suffering of the body. My contention is that, in this novel, the authority of the body is staged in its ability to affect the Magistrate despite his own will. (Marais 2011b: 66)

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the body constitutes the primary site of empathetic encounters. In the conversations of the Magistrate and Colonel Joll little empathy can be found (apart from trying to pry loose the intentions of the other; a destructive use similar to that of Eugene Dawn). Language also carries with it cultural constructions of difference among people, as we have seen in the case of Magda. The body predates these constructions, and is something equally shared by all human beings (and other sentient beings, as shall be discussed later); think of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Shylock's claim to a shared bodily existence. More specifically, the body in a state of pain reduces us to a core being with the bodily sensation of severe pain. Marais argues, "[t]he body in pain transgresses the linguistically and discursively inscribed difference between people by asserting an incontrovertible reality that lies beyond the cultural enclosure and its local forms of knowledge." (Marais 2011b: 69) Coetzee faces the challenge of a textual representation and a narrative foregrounding of the body, thus establishing a site beyond language but expressed through language nevertheless. For "[t]orture in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is also a textual matter," as Dominic Head points out, referring to the scene when the word 'ENEMY' is written on the backs of the prisoners, who are then thrashed until the writing has been washed off by blood and sweat (WFB 104-6). Head continues: "Coetzee is alluding to Kafka's story 'In the Penal Colony' here, a brutal story in which inscription and execution are conjoined in a deluded notion of justice." (Head 2009: 50)[66]

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[64] Russell Evan Samolsky discusses the tortured body with Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in mind in the third chapter of his dissertation (Samolsky 2003).

[65] For a discussion of the literary representation of torture in South African literature see Coetzee 1986.

[66] Michael Valdez Moses discusses in his essay "The Mark of the Empire: Writing, History, and Torture in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*" how Kafka's story is refracted through a Foucauldean lens in the novel (referred to in Head 2009: 33).

### The Ritual Washing of Feet

The foregrounding of the body enters the narrative when the Magistrate becomes aware of the torture of the prisoners. From general concern he moves to a particular concern when he orders the barbarian girl to be brought to his private rooms and develops a fascination for her injuries, her crippled feet and partially blinded eyes. In his ritual washing he is able to lose himself, in a way relieving himself of the horrors having taken place under the command of Colonel Joll, and maybe seeking some form of redemption, even if in a strange manner.[67] Again, the closing of the eyes, now associated with sleep, opens him up, as the following collage of quotes from *Waiting for the Barbarians* illustrates:

> I lose myself in the rhythm of what I am doing. I lose awareness of the girl herself. There is a space of time which is blank to me: perhaps I am not even present. (30) My eyes close. It becomes an intense pleasure to keep them closed, to savour the blissful giddiness. (31) It is rapture, of a kind. (33) I close my eyes and lose myself in the rhythm of the rubbing […]. (33) I am abstracted, lost in the rhythm of rubbing and kneading the swollen ankle. (59)[68]

Note the religious undertones in the Magistrate's reflections, when he speaks of "bliss" and "rapture".[69] The site of the body allows him to imagine a positive state of being, a state of universal communion; altogether a deceptive intuition, but a first intimation of a change taking place within him.

At one point he uses the image of the axe: "But more often in the very act of caressing her I am overcome with sleep as if poleaxed, fall into oblivion […]. These dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment, blank, outside time." (33) For Magda the axe was an instrument of violence, in *The Master of Petersburg* it is a metaphor for reading ("[...] being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering." MOP 47) and in *Summertime* Julia says: "A book should be an axe to chop open the frozen sea inside of us." ST 61). Shutting the eyes opens our other perceptions, puts an emphasis on our more corporeal sensations; and the Magistrate in his treatments of the barbarian girl learns his lesson: "I shut my eyes, breathe deeply to still my agitation, and concentrate wholly on seeing her through my blind fingertips." (46) The blindness of touch becomes a way of seeing, or rather sensing, a truth not available to the eye.

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[67] Judie Newman offers an original discussion of Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* ["an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo"] as "intertextual frame" for *Waiting for the Barbarians*. (Newman 1998:128; 126-138)

[68] Coetzee 1980. All quotes in section 2.2.3 will be from WFB unless indicated otherwise.

[69] "But the Magistrate's ritual is not solely a parody of the liberal's tendency to wallow in guilt. It also reinstates the dignity and mystery of the body of the other, partly through its undeniably Christian resonances, and partly through the Magistrate's hesitation to consummate his relationship with the girl, as if her body were sacred and such an act a profanation." (Pearsall 1998: 224)

**Looking the Other in the Eye**

There are intriguing parallels between Colonel Joll's torturous mode of interrogation and the Magistrate attempt to penetrate the dark open secret hidden in the girls blinded eyes, which she at first evades with a telling gesture: "'I am…' – she holds up her forefinger, grips it, twists it." (29) and then reveals in an anti-climatic report the torture suffered by her, closely followed by the Magistrate's realization of the negligible distance between him and Joll that comes to him "in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which here comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me" (48)

Nevertheless, the glances exchanged remain a central discourse in the encounter. The injured eyes of the barbarian girl allow her only to see the other at an angle: "[…] the black eyes that look through and past me. […] Her eyes move from my face and settle somewhere behind me to the right. […] Each time she gives me a strange regard, staring straight ahead of her until I am near, then very slowly turning her head away from me." (27) The fascination of the Magistrate leads him onto the path of penetration/interrogation – "[…] she cannot but feel my gaze pressing upon her with the weight of a body" (59) – which makes his curiosity invasive and clearly shows a lack of empathetic cautiousness: "I wave a hand in front of her eyes. She blinks. I bring my face closer and stare into her eyes. She wheels her gaze from the wall on to me. The black irises are set off by milky whites as clear as a child's. I touch her cheek: she starts." (28) Here the Magistrate fails to take her perspective, fails to engage with her empathetically; and the sympathy he extends does not take him even half the way. Laura Wright […] remarks that the Magistrate's "inability to see what motivates his actions is a kind of blindness that results in a failure of the sympathetic imagination." (Wright 2006: 80) In my argument, it is exactly the Magistrate's perplexed sense of her otherness or strangeness that renders him responsible for the barbarian girl.[70] The Magistrate enters a state of sympathetic responsibility, but yet has to reach out further to fully employ his sympathetic imagination and unleash his empathetic capabilities beyond mere general concern for the well-being of others.

In the previous novels the others are only minimally endowed with a voice, but the barbarian girl is awarded her own perspective, which of course is related to us by the Magistrate – but unlike Jacobus and Magda he seems a more reliable narrator. The girl comments on her gaze: "There is a blur. But I can see out of the sides of my eyes." (31) and "I am looking. This is how I look." (28) What she sees is a faint image of the Magistrate; she

[70] See also Marais 2011b: 67. Marais comments: "Evidently, the Magistrate no longer knows himself. Since they bear little relation to his assumptions, intentions, and ostensible desires, he finds his actions totally unpredictable." (Marais 2011b: 70)

cannot fully make out the other, but only sees "a grey form […] a blur, a voice, a smell, a centre of energy." (32) The reader gets a sense that on a level beyond the visual, the Magistrate and the girl manage to engage with each other, if only to a limited extent. Ultimately, when they look at each other, they encounter a blank: "I look into the eye. Am I to believe that gazing back at me she sees nothing – my feet perhaps, parts of the room, a hazy circle of light, but at the centre where I am, only a blur, a blank?" (33)

**The Blank Face**

The Magistrate attempts to reconstruct the first time he laid eyes on the barbarian girl, before he called her in, when she was penned up with her now dead father, a scenery he had observed from his window (a glass interface, comparable to Eugene's spying on his wife and the lighthouse metaphor of Magda). In the "honeycomb of [his] brain" he searches for the memory, but finds only "a space, a blankness." (51) Instead he has a "vision of her closed eyes and closed face filming over with skin. Blank, like a fist beneath a black wig, the face grows out of the throat and out of the blank body beneath it, without aperture, without entry." (45) "[I]t is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry." (46) Still haunted by the dark desire to penetrate her, though he resists the temptation of the flesh (yes: biblical tone intended); though at one point he strokes her intimately, only later on their trek to her people does he succumb to her advances (and yes: a very male construction). The Magistrate can recall in detail the entire scenery of the courtyard with all the prisoners, including the father of the girl, but:

> The space beside the man remains empty, but a faint sense of the presence of the girl, an aura, begins to emerge. … With a rush of feeling I stretch out to touch her hair, her face. There is no answering life. It is like caressing an urn or a ball, something which is all surface. (52)

Again we can see how the Magistrate fails to penetrate the surface of the other; this corresponds with the girl appearing in his dreams, who ultimately also reveals a blank face.[71] With Eugene Dawn's mode of encounter in mind, this might be for the better. But in a more positive light, the "rush of feeling" the Magistrate experiences could lead to a better intersubjective understanding. At least it is an indicator of a "heart reaching out." Yet, as Stephen Clingman notes, the relationship between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl "shows only a distorted form of reciprocity." (Clingman 2009: 227)

[71] The most insightful reading of the dreams featured in WFB is offered in Poyner 2009: 62-63. The "blank face" has invited numerous readings of *Waiting for the Barbarians* with Levinas in mind. Derek Attridge, Sam Durrant, and Mike Marais make extensive use of Levinas in their readings of Coetzee.

## 2.3 From the Heart

In a second step, I intend to show how Coetzee stages the emotional life of his characters by having them speak in the "language of their hearts". This can be taken literally, as references to the heart as the seat of sympathy (and the sympathetic imagination; cf. *Elizabeth Costello*) are fairly common in Coetzee's fiction. It is shorthand for the emotional inner life and the state of the individual soul, again possibly to be understood as the ethical and moral substance of our being. This section will analyze how the four protagonists conceive themselves in the terms of their hearts.

The four protagonists of Coetzee's first three novels already show a clear development in their engagement with others, and thereby also of the sympathetic imagination and the implied empathetic processes. Elizabeth Costello identifies the heart as the seat of the sympathetic imagination (EC 61) and calls on us to "open [y]our heart and listen to what [y]our heart says." (EC 82) The language of the heart in the early novels gives an indication of the protagonists' position. In *Dusklands* we encounter the "cold hearts" of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, both of whom are presented as primarily concerned with themselves. Then again, they do "speak form the heart," sharing intimate thoughts with the reader. But their hearts do not reach out to the other, not even in an act of "negative capability," imagining that which they are not. Magda actively searches for a "language of the heart" and attempts to engage whole-heartedly with the servants Hendrik and Klein-Anna; her failure results from a compromised position of power. The Magistrate finally comes closest to finding an engagement with the other that involves the heart. With the body and the animal as catalysts, his inner being grows and reaches out sincerely. The barbarian girl as mysterious other serves as an interface and indicator of his success. He indeed reaches her, but only in a marginal sense, since her being remains alien to him until the very end. Michael K speaks little of the heart, instead demonstrates a mode of self-isolation, reflected by how others react to him (see section 2.5).

### 2.3.1 Eugene Dawn: Isolation of a Bleeding Heart

The image Eugene has of his seat of sympathy is poisoned: "When I think of the heart that holds my secret I think of something closed and wet and black, like say, the ball in the toilet cistern. Sealed in my chest of treasures, lapped in dark blood, it tramps its blind round

and will not die." (DL 48)[72] Only in his writing does he manage to be at one with himself, when "[t]he frozen sea inside [him] thaws and cracks." (14) Eugene Dawn is a thought experiment on Coetzee's side, re-imagining a mind that thinks up the horrors of war and illustrating the effects this might have on that person. Coetzee does not present 'pure evil' to the reader (he would most likely consider the notion absurd), but demonstrates the complex contradictions but also the strong convictions supporting Eugene Dawn's stance. Eugene longs for a connection with his fellow beings, especially with his child and his wife: "My heart went out to her. I longed to stretch a hand through the glass." (33) Or, more strongly:

> In euphoric gestures of liberation I stretch out my right hand. My fingers, expressive, full of meaning, full of love, close on their narrow shoulders, but close empty, as clutches have a way of doing in the empty dream-space of one's head. I repeat the movement several times, the movement of love (open the chest, reach the arm) and discouragement (empty hand, empty heart). (34)

Eugene Dawn is curious about the inner mechanisms of his being: "[…] I approve of the enterprise of exploring the self. I am deeply interested in my self." (46) But this exploration does not involve others, it is self-serving and self-centred. He remains stuck within himself, even after his crisis that results in him stabbing his own son; this self-referentiality is poignantly expressed by him: "My true ideal (I really believe this) is of an endless discourse of character, the self reading the self to the self in all infinity." (38) Eugene Dawn is on a path of self-assertion leading to personal crisis. Eugene is in seclusion in the library, his workspace. When he ventures into the world outside his actions bring about crisis and collapse. The reader accompanies him on his path of destruction, inhabiting his mind through an act of sympathetic imagination.

### 2.3.2 Jacobus Coetzee: Sick at Heart

Jacobus Coetzee has hardly any emotional reaction to the 'Hottentots', but he has a romantic notion of a pure 'state of nature'. His heart is not cold, unmoved. In one instance he describes how as a child he was taught "how to dispose of wounded birds":

> The thin red necks of such birds always awoke compassion and distaste in me. I revolted from repeating the snap, and untidier modes of annihilation like stamping the head flat sent rills down my spine. So I would stand there cuddling the expiring creature in my hands, venting upon it the tears of my pity for all tiny helpless suffering things, until it passed away. (105)

Contrasting his caring attitude towards animals, he ponders whether in his former servants there "was not an immense world of delight closed off to my senses? May I not have killed something of inestimable value?" (106) But this world remains inaccessible to him, who has

[72] All quotes in section 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 will be from DL unless indicated otherwise.

hidden himself away "in the blindest alley of the labyrinth of [his] self." (96) The sympathetic imagination involved in the creation of this character has not transpired into his paper being: "I was undergoing nothing less than a failure of imagination before the void. I was sick at heart." (102) This notwithstanding, he maintains his sense of superiority and impenetrability: "I carried my secret buried within me. I could not be touched." (75)

### 2.3.3 Magda: Lonely Heart

Magda presents a more ambivalent case. Early on, she evokes a positive image of herself: "The Angel, that is how she is sometimes known. […] Her heart sings. […] Her stores of compassion are boundless." (HOC 5)[73] Like Jacobus Coetzee she feels attached to the nature that surrounds her and like Elizabeth Costello she speaks of the "ecstasy of pure being": "The farm, the desert, the whole world as far as the horizon is in an ecstasy of communion with itself, exalted by the vain urge of my consciousness to inhabit it." (49) However, Magda does not feel herself as part of this nature, she has a sense of separation parallel to her isolation from her cohabitants: "I stare out through a sheet of glass into a darkness that is complete […]. I live inside a skin inside a house. There is no act I know of that will liberate me into the world." (10) The dividing gulf (the glass interface) seems insurmountable to her: "[…] we [masters and servants] might as well be on separate planets, we on ours, they on theirs." (28) Her isolation finds expression in her erratic monologue, which she once labels as "the macabre theatre of myself":

> This monologue of the self is a maze of words out of which I shall not find a way until someone else gives me a lead. I roll my eyeballs, I pucker my lips, I stretch my ears, but the face in the mirror is my face and will go on being mine even if I hold it in the fire till it drips. (16)

The "maze of words" and the "face in the mirror" represent the two sites of her self-encounter: On the one hand she is a linguistic construction (pointing to Coetzee as author), on the other hand a bodily presence, a face that sticks to her far more than her identity does. Magda longs for a language that comes from the heart and establishes an empathetic connection with the others. When she invites Klein-Anna to sleep in the main house, she senses that she is approaching that language, as strange as it might feel to her: "The words come without premeditation. I feel joy. That must be how other people speak, from their hearts." (87) She has a strong desire to overcome the gap that separates her from the others, and wonders:

[73] All quotes in this section will be from HOC unless indicated otherwise.

> Why will no one speak to me in the true language of the heart? The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled! (133) […] Or is it simply that the story took a wrong turn somewhere, that if I had found a more gradual path to a gentler form of intimacy we might all have learned to be happy together? (119)

Unlike Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, Magda maps out the possibility of a proper engagement with the other, and we find the sympathetic imagination to have taken root in this isolated woman out 'in the heart of the country': "In the heart of nowhere, in this dead place, I am making a start; or, if not that, making a gesture." (110)

### 2.3.4 Magistrate: The Budding Heart

The Magistrate marks the next step of interrelation with the other. While Magda can only imagine the possibility of an empathetic interpersonal link, the Magistrate moves from a passive position ("My heart goes out to her, but what can I do?" WFB 37)[74] to a position of sympathy and attempted empathy, as ambivalent as his approach might seem. Towards the end he develops a deep affection for the barbarian girl, particularly enhanced through their physical intimacy, so that his heart develops an "affectionate glow" (72) for his "little bird-woman" who he warmly hugs. (45) The Magistrate understands the girl's difficult position and acknowledges: "What bird has the heart to sing in a thicket of thorns?" (44)

A first turning point for the Magistrate is reached by his encounter with a ram on one of his hunts. They "gaze at each other" (42) and the Magistrate refrains from pulling the trigger, giving himself up to a moment of deep insight:

> He chews again, a single scythe of the jaws, and stops. In the clear silence of the morning I find an obscure sentiment lurking at the edge of my consciousness. With the buck before me suspended in immobility, there seems to be time for all things, time even to turn my gaze inward and see what it is that has robbed the hunt of its savour: he sense that this has become no longer a morning's hunting but an occasion on which either he proud ram bleeds to death on the ice or the old hunter misses his aim; that for the duration of this frozen / moment the stars are locked in a configuration in which events are not themselves but stand for other things. Behind my paltry cover I stand trying to shrug off this irritating and uncanny feeling, till the buck wheels and with a whisk of his tail and a brief splash of hooves disappears into the tall reeds. (43)

What the Magistrate here terms an "obscure sentiment" can be read as the awakening of his sympathetic imagination. He senses the communion with all sentient beings, here in the form of a ram. The decision not to take its life marks a turning point for the moral awakening of the Magistrate.

When the Magistrate travels with the girl and a small party, he feels the distance between them diminishing: "In twelve days on the road we have grown closer than in months

[74] All quotes in section 2.3.4 and 2.4 will be from WFB unless indicated otherwise.

of living in the same rooms." (76) But he also realizes, when he notices the "fluency, [her] quickness, [her] self-possession" with which the girl converses with the accompanying soldiers in the "pidgin of the frontier" that he could have done better: "[…] But, like a fool, instead of giving her a good time I oppressed her with gloom. Truly, the world ought to belong to singers and dancers!" (68) As the singer expresses his soul in song through his voice, so does the dancer express his soul through the movements of his body. As readers we get to witness the first budding of the sympathetic imagination in Coetzee's characters, and we have followed this development closely, we are most likely moved and feel the stirrings of empathy in our hearts.

A second turning point in his moral development is marked by the violation of his body and his facing death at the hand of his executioners: standing on a horse with a noose around his neck. Susan Pearsall comments on the physical suffering as catalyst:

> Only the trials of actual suffering bring home to him the truth: that his own humanity consists of an embattled and possibly false set of values that disappear when confronted with the heavy, coarse reality of his own embodied status. The actual human body, which tends to dissolve in Foucault's work, returns in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and haunts the text with its undeniable presence. But in becoming a symbol of universal justice, the body becomes, not a promise of immanence, but a call for transcendent values." (Pearsall 1998: 223-4)

Coetzee's staging of the body serves as enactment of the individuation of bodies in pain, followed by the transcendent realization that the sensation of pain is shared by all sentient beings. Don Randall comments:

> [The Magistrate's] reduction to merely animal subsistence is equated with an exclusively carnal sense of self: like Pavlov's dogs, he begins to salivate uncontrollably upon the presentation of food, and he comes to know "the misery of being simply a body that feels itself sick and wants to be well" (87). (Randall 2007: 214)

Not the rational being is destined to engage with the other, but the embodied being:

> What is adumbrated in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, then, is a form of ethical action that is not grounded in the perceptions, experiences, and understanding of a rational, autonomous individual. Very clearly, this novel treats knowledge and reason with the utmost suspicion. Knowledge, that which invests the rational subject with a sense of control of both world and self, is always local and therefore generates rather than grasps otherness. It can only ever attempt to comprehend others by integrating them into the knowing subject's priorly formed conceptual system. (Marais 2009: 31-32; also Marais 2011b: 72)

Opposing knowledge and rationality with embodiment fits the overall gesture of Coetzee's literary staging of characters. The sympathetic imagination requires embodiment in order to function properly without the body there is no encounter. Just as empathy, however, does not necessarily entail better moral judgment, embodiment is not a straight-forward strategy to enhance the encounter with the other. Pearsall observes:

> As Coetzee's renditions of embodiment indicate, "aestheticization" also refers to a strongly centralized power's attempt to enslave and terrorize the citizens by reducing them to corporeal, vulnerable bodies while appropriating for itself the transcendent power of the artistic demiurge. The type of authoritarian embodiment particularly hinges on sexuality in South Africa, with its obvious puritan legacies; sex and sexual identity are aestheticized in Coetzee's work because the state focuses on biological impulses as potential sites of political control as well as rebellion. (Pearsall 1998: 241)

Coetzee could have written a more sexually driven narrative (and the manuscripts seem to suggest that this was a direction the text was taking at an early stage),[75] and might have fallen prey to the "authoritarian embodiment" inscribed into South African society. Instead, he cautiously avoids this by reigning in the sexual impulses of the Magistrate for the benefit of a more profound encounter with the barbarian girl, and thereby with his own moral self. By the time he and the girl do have sexual intercourse, they have moved beyond the outpost of the empire and are on their way to "her people," moving in presumably neutral territory. The off-hand way the scene occurs downplays its prominent meaning in the larger picture. Responding to the barbarian girl's menstruation and the fellow travellers' disgust, the Magistrate improvises a cleansing ritual; he draws a line in the sand, and together (!) with the barbarian girl crosses the border-line to get back to the camp:

> The sequence of events reveals just how far the Magistrate has come. He is now prepared to "contaminate" himself with the girl, to cross the frontier, and recognize the illusory nature of social boundaries, mere lines drawn in the sand, the product of cultural projections. (Newman 1998: 134)

The Magistrate may not have developed his sympathetic imagination fully, and his empathetic capabilities remain limited, but he has taken a big step away from the logic of empire towards a logic of the human heart.

## 2.4 The Magistrate's Journey – A Journey of the Soul

To conclude this section about the "hearts" of the characters in the first three novels by Coetzee, I would like to consider Book X of Plato's Republic as an intertext[76] for Section III of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (62-83), proposing that the final journey to return the barbarian girl parallels a shift taking place in the Magistrate.[77] Plato argues for the immortality of the soul, concluding his argument with the myth of the warrior Er, who was granted permission to

[75] Hermann Wittenberg was kind enough to share this thought with me after having consulted the early manuscripts.

[76] Brenda Dean Schildgen discusses Plato's Symposium as intertext of Elizabeth Costello (Schildgen 2003: 325). Carrol Clarkson was so kind to point out the relevance of Book X of Plato's *Republic* for the context of my discussion. Recently Coetzee addresses the allegory of the cave from Book VII in a letter to Paul Auster (Coetzee/Auster 2013).

[77] Emanuela Tegla presents a similar reading, though in her account the scene in the open square marks a culmination point (Tegla 2011).

travel into the realm of the dead and return to report what he saw. After 1000 years of punishment or reward, the souls gather to choose a new life for the next reincarnation of their souls. Based on previous experiences, most souls fail to choose a good life for themselves. After all souls have made their choices, supervised by the three Fates Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos, they embark on a journey out of the afterlife and into their new lives:

> [T]hey marched on the plain of Forgetfulness, in intolerable scorching heat, for the plain was a barren waste destitute of trees and verdure; and then towards the evening they encamped by the river of Unmindfulness, whose water no vessel can hold; of this they were all obliged to drink a certain quantity, and those who were not saved by wisdom drank more than was necessary; and each one as he drank forgot all things. Now after they had gone to rest, about the middle of the night there was a thunderstorm and earthquake, and then in an instant they were driven upwards in all manner of ways to their birth, like stars shooting. He himself was hindered from drinking the water. But in what manner or by what means he returned to the body he could not say; only in the morning, awakening suddenly, he found himself lying on the pyre. (Plato's *Republic*, 498-499; 621a-b)[78]

Compare this account with the stations of the Magistrate's journey to return the barbarian girl to her tribe. Section III is introduced with the beating of wings, a small trope Coetzee likes to use to foreshadow events of significance (cf. epiphanic moment in *Youth*, etc.): "The arrival of the first of the migrating waterfowl confirms the earlier signs, the ghost of a new warmth on the wind, the glassy translucence of the lake-ice. Spring is on its way, one of these days it will be time to plant." (62) Coetzee immediately plays it down to an announcement of spring. The Magistrate composes two documents before he leaves the outpost. The first states his intent to restore the goodwill of the barbarians. As for the second document the Magistrate is not sure of what it should be: "A testament? A memoir? A confession? A history of thirty years on the frontier?" (62) It remains an "empty white paper," but the finality of his departure and a sense of closure remain with the reader. The Magistrate conscripts three men and informs the girl of his plan: "Now that I have committed myself to a course I sleep more easily and even detect within myself something like happiness." (63)

Coetzee has them wander through a desert, across a frozen lake, a lagoon, and finally into the plains where they encounter the barbarians. The sun gives off no warmth, the wind brings tears to their eyes. (63) They pass "wind-eroded clay terraces," "banks of red dust-clouds" and travel under a "yellow hazy sky." (64) Coetzee has commented on how he made an effort to create an unspecific landscape, not pointing to any specific locale. Coetzee uses the landscape as a background for the Magistrate's evolvement. The party drinks water from an alkaline lake, which results in diarrhoea (64); in a sense a cleansing of the body, which in the case of the Magistrate has grown soft (65) – remember, this is before he undergoes torture

[78] See Plato 1953.

at the hands of Mandel and Colonel Joll. The wind howls and blows “from nowhere to nowhere, veiling the sky in a cloud of red dust. [...] Dust rather than air becomes the medium in which we live. We swim through dust like fish through water.” (65) We come from dust and we go back to dust. The eschatological allusions are present everywhere. The counting of the days alludes to the biblical genesis: “On the third day [...]” (65) “On the fifth day [...]” (66) “On the seventh day [...] (67); ironically, they “rest on the eight day.” (70) On the fourth day they cross an “ancient lake-bed”, a “terrain [...] more desolate than anything we have yet seen.” (65) This river-like terrain changes into duneland: “Standing on a dune-top, shielding my eyes, staring ahead, I can see nothing but swirling sand.” (67) One of the pack-horses reaches its limits, and the Magistrate takes on him the task of mercy: “I can swear that the beast knows what is to happen. At the sight of the knife its eyes roll. With the blood spurting from its neck it scrambles free of the sand and totters a pace or two downwind before it falls.” (67) The Magistrate takes responsibility for the horse – rightfully, since he has forced it on this trip – and acknowledges its terror; comparable to his earlier encounter with the waterbuck, only with a different outcome in accordance with circumstances. In both cases he looks the animal in the eye and feels its being. The act also contains a ritual component; if we take the idea of the realm of death seriously, we might be reminded of the sacrifice of a ram that Odysseus makes to summon the dead souls, an eerie passage in Homer’s *Ulysses*. The sacrifice establishes contact with the dead souls, but also appeases them. The environment the party encounters – ” the bed of an ancient terminal lagoon” – points in a similar direction: “Dead reeds, ghostly white and brittle to the touch, line what were its banks. The trees are poplars, also long dead. They have died since the underground water receded too far to be reached by their roots years and years ago.” (67) Coetzee inserts another incident pointing to the Magistrate’s development. One night the barbarian girl offers herself to him quite plainly, and he accepts, and “in a minute five months of senseless hesitancy are wiped out and I am floating back into easy sensual oblivion.” (69) The Magistrate loses himself, something Mike Marais sees as a prerequisite to encounter the other in a meaningful way. However, the Magistrate does not take to it easily: “When I wake it is with a mind washed so blank that terror rises in me. Only with a deliberate effort can I reinsert myself into time and space: into a bed, a tent, a night, a world, a body pointing west and east.” (69) Again with a playful biblical undertone alluding to God’s satisfaction with his creation, Coetzee lets the Magistrate acknowledge his ‘achievement’: “It is done, I am content.” (69) Having progressed considerably in terms of a moral awakening, the Magistrate cannot grasp his change of heart rationally: “I am with her not for whatever raptures she may promise or yield but for other

reasons, which remain obscure to me as ever." (70) After attempting to repeat the love-making (now love, not sex), he has to admit that his "intuitions are clearly fallible." But his heart "continues its affectionate glow towards this girl." (71-72)

During this episode the Magistrate senses the movement of his soul, senses that something beyond his control is happening to him, something he had not apprehended:

> My lips move, silently composing and recomposing the words. *'Or perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through.'* I stare at this last proposition without detecting any answering movement in myself toward assent or dissent. The words grow more and more opaque before me; soon they have lost all meaning. I sigh at the end of a long day, in the middle of a long night. Then I turn to the girl, embrace her, draw her tight against me. She purrs in her sleep, where soon I have joined her. (70; emphasis added)

Surely, many readings of this passage are possible. In the context of my reading, however, I take the Magistrate's thought to point towards the awakening of his new soul, a soul not yet articulated. The Magistrate is searching for a new life for his soul to live. After having crossed the "plain of Forgetfulness,"[79] leaving behind his colonial self, having camped at the "the river of Unmindfulness," allowing a physical communion with the barbarian girl, the party is now faced with a thunderstorm: "Rolling down upon us over the snowy plain is a gigantic black wave. It is still miles away but visibly devouring the earth in its approach. Its crest is lost in the murky clouds. 'A storm!'" (72)

The sequence presented in Plato's account of the afterlife has been moved by Coetzee into the embellished realm of fiction, the surroundings made subject to a more detailed description and the stations slightly altered and interrupted by narrative events absent in Plato's account. These events refer to a rather Christian context of sacrifice (the horse), communion (making love), and ultimately redemption from past disgrace. As the storm hits the camp it creates turmoil among the men, but the girl remains calm and tends the horses: "The girl stands with her arms stretched like wings over the necks of two horses. She seems to be talking to them: though their eyeballs glare, they are still." (73) Like an angel the barbarian girl demonstrates the communality of humans and animals. Finally, the storm abides:

[79] One could object that the order of events does not comply with the sequence of Plato's account. The salt desert the party crosses comes closer to resembling a „plain of Forgetfulness" than the marshlands in the first section of the journey. Since Coetzee himself has never commented on his use of Plato in his fiction, my reading does not propose that Coetzee intended to create a simulacrum of Plato's depiction of the afterlife; it is a context I impose on the text for the sake of my argument, something I believe all criticism is entitled to in order to create a creative reading that adds to the text instead of expounding a supposed meaning. Coetzee has commented on creating the landscape traversed by the Magistrate and his small party: „I wanted to create characters and a setting that belong to no recognizable contemporary situations. But people who know South Africa will probably pick up allusions." (*Newsweek*, 31 August 1982, from a conversation with Peter Younghusband; quoted in Kannemeyer 2012: 335-336) The most prominent allusion would be the torturing and subsequent death of Steve Biko, which found its way into Coetzee's depiction of torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

> Then at midday the wind drops as suddenly as if a gate has been closed somewhere. Our ears ring with the unfamiliar quiet. We ought to move our numbed limbs, clean ourselves off, load the animals, anything to make the blood run in our veins, but all we want is to lie a little longer in our nest. A sinister lethargy! (73)

The "sinister lethargy" resembles the hesitation of accepting the renewed state, the state of a re-born soul (this applies primarily to the Magistrate, since we have no insight into the souls of the other men and the barbarian girl). The blood running through the veins marks the completion of the reincarnation. As if to indicate to us the significance of this sequence, Coetzee sets it apart from the rest of the account with an asterisk, before continuing the narrative with the tenth day and the encounter with the barbarians.

Coetzee takes us into the 'far territory' in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In conclusion, I would like to pick up on the cinematic scope of this narrative. One scene in particular is emblematic for the approaching of others, a main theme in all of Coetzee's fiction. After a strenuous journey through marshlands, a salt desert and finally a snow storm the party sees others on the horizon:

> The specks he points to in the distance are men, men on horseback: who but barbarians! I turn to the girl, whose shambling mount I lead. 'We are nearly there,' I say. 'There are people ahead, we will soon know who they are.' The oppression of the past days lifts from my shoulders. Moving to the front, quickening my pace, I turn our march towards the three tiny figures in the distance.
> We push on towards them for half an hour before we realize that we are not getting closer. As we move they move. 'They are ignoring us,' I think, and consider lighting a fire. But when I call a halt the three specks seem to halt too; when we resume our march they begin to move. 'Are they reflections of us, is this a trick of the light?' I wonder. We cannot close the gap. How long have they been dogging us? Or do they think we are dogging them?
> 'Stop, there is no point in chasing them,' I say to the men. 'Let us see if they will meet one of us alone.' So I mount the girl's horse and ride out alone towards the strangers. For a short while they seem to remain still, watching and waiting. Then they begin to recede, shimmering on the edge of the dust-haze. Though I urge it on, my horse is too weak to raise more than a shambling trot. I give up the chase, dismount, and wait for my companions to reach me.
> […]
> With a pole and a white linen shirt I make a banner and ride out towards the strangers.
> […]
> A swirl of dust obscures them, then they reappear: twelve mounted men on the skyline. I plod on, he white banner flapping over my shoulder. Though I keep my eye on the crest, I fail to catch the moment at which they vanish. (74-75)

The gap cannot be closed, not even when bearing a white banner of peace. Numerous critics have pointed out the insurmountable gulf between the I and the other in Coetzee's fiction. The prospects, however, are not quite as bleak as the landscape the Magistrate and his troop have passed through. And, after all, they do get to meet the troupe of barbarians. The white banner raised by the Magistrate can be compared to the fiction that Coetzee puts out in his efforts to encounter otherness in all its forms. More importantly, the Magistrate has undergone a transformation, has experienced a rebirth of his soul. And as readers we have participated in

this process, have witnessed his turmoil. And in the last section of the novel we see the Magistrate take a stand against Colonel Joll, who in turn makes him share the suffering of torture, teaching him yet another lesson of humility and compassion, himself learning nothing and being forced to retreat by the futility of his enterprise; the defeated Colonel rides off into the sunset in a state of disgrace. The Magistrate has not become a saint, at least not quite.[80] He is not a martyr, though he comes close to dying for his belief in compassion. But he is undeniably a new person, a transformed soul, at the close of the novel.

## 2.5 Life & Times of Michael K

Coetzee's fourth novel, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), can be seen as a hinge between the first three und the following three novels. The grouping is admittedly somewhat arbitrary, but takes into account the shifts in formal aspects of Coetzee's writing and a shift in emphasis. In the first three novels the individual is portrayed against the backdrop of colonial and imperial empires. All three are narrated in first person present tense. *Dusklands* and *Heart of the Country* are openly anti-realistic and metafictional, foregrounding the textuality of both narrative and character. *Waiting for the Barbarians* offers a more realistic setting and plot, and presents the first character undergoing vital changes within, as opposed to the undulating self of Magda – that ultimately remains in the same place and state – and the static selves of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee. In *Life & Times of Michael K* Coetzee again presents a character with a rather static self, but a stasis of inner tranquillity in contrast to the inner turmoil of the earlier characters.

On a formal level, Coetzee uses "the past tense as primary narrative" for the first time (Heider 1993: 83). Sarah Dove Heider explores the temporality of *Life & Times of Michael K* in her essay "The Timeless Ecstasy of Michael K" (1993):

> „Now was the time." This is the temporality of Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, an indeterminant, endless nowness, a resistance to any other defining restrictions beyond the narrative attachment „was." For „Now *is* the time" would release Michael K completely into an uncharted chaos, would, indeed, remove his subjectivity from the reader's scope. (Heider 1993: 83; original emphasis)

The reader can assume the middle voice employed by Magda also inhabiting Michael K's narrative. The stasis in time, an ever-present now, is opposed by his movements in space, from Cape Town to Prince Albert and the Karoo and back again, which unsettle the

[80] Anton Leist's assessment in his essay "Against Society, Against History, Against Reason: Coetzee's Archaic Postmodernism" is similar: "[T]he Magistrate undergoes a development for the better and, refined through both brutal events and especially the ordeal of being tortured himself, ends up a more understanding person than he was at the beginning." (Leist 2010: 205)

tranquillity and lack of impulsiveness so present in Michael K, instead handing him over to an "uncharted chaos." The internal chaos of Magda is here replaced by an external chaos of oppression and resistance.

Another formal shift lies in the use of the third person, which relieves the reader from the immediacy of the account, as does the past tense narration. This shift from I to He, from first person narrative to third person narrative, changes the game. In the first three novels the reader was a witness to four singular consciousnesses and their interplay with their environment, featuring a restricted number of human and animal contacts, with an author looming over the narratives, removed through an ingenious narrative focalization. Moving to a third person narrative might also have been motivated by the shift to a coloured protagonist, although any mentioning of skin tones is pointedly avoided – representing Michael K as other in the first person might seem presumptuous. In a more positive light, representing him in the third person can be seen as an exercise of negative capability. Steven Kellmann sees Coetzee's portrayal of Michael K – and the later characters Friday (*Foe*) and Vercueil (*Age of Iron*) –as "assertions of negative capability, of Coetzee's skill at imagining the lives of dark-skinned men." (see also above p. 20) He goes on to claim this attempt as "consistent with Coetzee's project of engaging alterity by transcending his own race, gender, and nationality." (Kellmann 2002: 326) Some critics disagree, however, and speak of the failure of Coetzee's imagination in regard to crossing the colour line; this remains an issue of contention among readers and critics.[81]

In this third person narration, Michael K is the focalizer of the narrative – interrupted only in Section 3 by the discourse of the medical officer;[82] this focalization counters the distancing by an intimate and detailed account of Michael K's inner life, through which Coetzee maps his mental attitudes: "The language of his inspection of the past is not that of memory, but of actual mental movement in time." (Heider 1993: 88) This combination of distance and proximity constitutes a new avenue for the sympathetic imagination of both the author and the reader. Instead of co-inhabiting the first person perspective, the reader is allowed the role of an observer only; this prevents him from emotional contagion that may have agitated readers of the first two novels especially. And the path of Michael K is accompanied by a peaceful lightness, not by violence and torture.

[81] After a lecture of mine on "The Sympathetic Imagination in the Early Novels" at Stellenbosch University in 2011, Sarah Nuttall poignantly put forward her doubts regarding Coetzee's negative capabilities, instead pointing out the self-referentiality of his fictions. In my view, this doesn't devaluate Coetzee's efforts in encountering others in his fictions or portraying the encounters of his protagonists.

[82] "He [medical officer, LTMK] progresses from the use of the referential pronoun, he, in relation to K, to the pronouns of communication, I and you." (Dovey 1998: 24)

A third aspect, indicating a shift in subject matter, is the setting of *Life & Times of Michael K*. After exploring colonial and imperial violence in the first three novels, Coetzee turns to a more contemporary setting. The narrative is set in Cape Town in a time of unrest and emergency laws, characterized by some critics as an apocalyptic future, but not too far removed from the South Africa of the 1980s and the growing conflict between apartheid rule and ANC resistance that in the 1970s entered a phase of increased violence, spurred by events such as the earlier Sharpeville massacre (1960), the Rivonia Trials (1963-64), the Soweto Uprising (1973), and the death of Steve Biko (1977).[83] The vagueness of the setting, however, makes *Life & Times of Michael K.* another case of "speculative history." The epigraph by Heraclitus preceding the novel points to the disastrous dichotomy created by the circumstances of war, the "father of all": "Some he makes slaves, and others free." (LTMK) Roadblocks, omnipresence of the military, the work camp Jackalsdrif, and railroad sabotage are all markers pointing to then current events in South Africa. With *Life & Times of Michael K* Coetzee moves closer to his own times and circumstances. That Coetzee draws on his experience of South Africa is beyond doubt. Michael K's habitation in the Little Karoo can be related to Coetzee's special bond to this landscape, as Manfred Loimeier has pointed out in his biography of Coetzee (Loimeier 2008: 9).[84] David Atwell also sees *Life & Times of Michael K* as reflecting Coetzee's personal situation as a writer in South Africa:

> Despite all the self-reflexivity, all the representational mirrors, to pretend that we can measure Coetzee's achievements without considering the effects of biography and place is to ignore the elephant in the room. Each gesture of fictive displacement, each act of imaginative relocation, speaks of a struggle both to speak at all and to keep the country at arm's length. Michael K's efforts to remain free and unobserved, in a landscape that has been completely mapped, fenced, and policed, is representative of a general condition affecting Coetzee's authorship. (Atwell 2008: 232-233)

Employing his negative capabilities gives Coetzee the opportunity to explore the local situation more fully, now including a new perspective from the other side of the oppressive rule of apartheid, instead of the centre of colonial rule (Jacobus Coetzee) or its sidelines (Magda).[85]

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[83] "If it [LTMK] is set ahead in time at all, then this is done as a way of looking, as if it had come to the surface, at what lies under the surface of the present. The harried homelessness of Michael K and his mother is the experience, in 1984, of hundreds of thousands of black people in South African squatter towns and 'resettlement' camps. A civil war is going on in 1984 on South Africa's borders, between black and white […]." (Gordimer 1998: 141)

[84] Loimeier's biography was published in 2008 (available only in German). Kannemeyer's monumental biography from 2012 was greeted as the first (authorized) biography of J.M. Coetzee. Both volumes are valuable sources in tracing the interconnections of fiction and biography in the work of J.M. Coetzee.

[85] Chris Ackerley adds an original take on the influence of Samuel Beckett's *Watt* on the formation of this novel:

> *Life & Times of Michael K*, perhaps more directly than any of Coetzee's other novels, reflects and refracts the complex tonalities of *Watt*, even to the extent of imitating its narrative form by having

In his contribution to the volume *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics* (Leist/Singer 2010), titled "Against Society, Against History, Against Reason: Coetzee's Archaic Modernism," Anton Leist argues that "Michael is not to be understood; he personifies the point from which one can look at the problem of understanding and living in society." (Leist 2010: 203) The central theme of *Life & Times of Michael K* (and of *Elizabeth Costello*) is seen by Leist as "the problem of whether there is a 'view from outside' society and whether rationality is a morally foundational characteristic of humans." (Leist 2010: 199) Coetzee's de-centring of narrative perspective to the social periphery, inhabited by K., achieves the effect of giving us access to a socially impartial point of view. Leist picks up the cue from Sarah Dove Heider about the "timeless ecstasy" of Michael K, and situates him out of place and out of time:

> Michael is meant to be a figure trying to avoid all structures of society, roles, economics, paid work, history, and communication, someone who has radicalized the alternative suggested to him as a social outsider into a pure version of otherness, which leaves him in nature, in a dazed, dreamlike, and wordless state that is, when fully conscious, the consciousness of the immediate presence. (Leist 2010: 203-204)

Leist's argument also covers the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Elizabeth Costello. He calls them archaic figures stranded in a modern world:

> Even if the life-form implied in these figures is a fairly clear one of animal-like primitiveness and innocence, how to transpose this life-form into our present situation remains open. [...] There are, in essence, two worlds coming into view: our everyday world of separation and time, words and power, and instrumental ends and means, and an alternative world, however vague, of amalgamation and presence, bodies and trance, self-forgetfulness and nondirected joy. (Leist 2010: 217-218)

Leist points out that this "alternative world" is the stage for Coetzee's enactment of his sympathetic imagination and also the stage for the reader's empathetic engagement. The "amalgamation and presence" of the characters and their bodies and the "self-forgetfulness" are ideal catalysts for inciting the reader's sympathetic imagination.

Leist also reads Coetzee's fictions as "forceful proof" of a "pragmatic postmodernism," that, on the one hand, keeps a critical distance toward specific forms of rationality and other 'imperial' achievements, but, on the other hand, guards itself against both arbitrary playfulness and a beautiful archaism (Leist 2010: 218-219). Perhaps Leist is pointing in the right direction, although I suspect that he underestimates the radical forcefulness with

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> one part of the narrative told by another voice: in *Watt*, that of Sam; and in *Life & Times of Michael K*, that of the medical officer of the work camp in which Michael is detained. *Watt* is planted unobtrusively into the South African world with such sensitivity and skill that it becomes almost "native" within that landscape, and testifies to what Coetzee, with respect to the appropriation, noted above, of Beckett by Athol Fugard, called in his post-Nobel interview the 'unceasing cross-fertilization across fences and boundaries.' (Ackerley 2011: 34)

which these "archaic characters" open new perspectives. The utopian dimension of *Life & Times of Michael K* might be more an indication of Coetzee's resignation in the face of history than due to an ironical distance from Michael K.

In his 2007 study *Aesthetic Nervousness – Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, Ato Quayson discusses *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Foe* and *Life & Times of Michael K* in the sixth chapter, "J.M. Coetzee – Speech, Silence, Autism and Dialogism," strongly drawing on Benita Parry's seminal 1994 essay "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee." Quayson writes:

> Autism seems to me particularly relevant to a discussion of characters such as Michael K, the Barbarian Girl, and Friday not because they illustrate broad aspects of an autistic spectrum, but because of the scrupulous silence they enjoin upon themselves, which carries a hint of their extreme discomfort with extant forms of social communication. (Quayson 2007: 150)

Quayson relates the literary representation of silence/autism to Bakthin's dialogism:

> Silence/autism and dialogism have to be seen as related and indeed dialectical pairs rather than as separate terms, for in the representation of inarticulacy an implied interlocutor is invoked whose role is to provide an ethos of continual dialogism and thus to maintain the process by which the silent character's nonsocial musings are inflected in a manifestly socially significant way. (Quayson 2007: 150)

The implied interlocutor of any literature is primarily the reader, and Quayson highlights this aspect:

> The final dimension of aesthetic nervousness is that between the reader and the text. The reader's status within a given text is a function of the several interacting elements such as the identifications with the vicissitudes of the life of a particular character, or the alignment between the reader and the shifting position of the narrator, or the necessary reformulations of the reader's perspective enjoined by the modulations of various plot elements and so on. (Quayson 2007: 15)

Michael K's limited mental capabilities endow him with a special status. The narrative repeatedly highlights his animal nature and his strong attachment to his natural surroundings. He thereby is likened to a subhuman status, bringing him closer to the animal state than to other humans.[86] The qualification of being subhuman only applies within a system of classification that Michael K has moved beyond. Quayson quotes Matthew Belmonte as saying that persons with autism may be described as „human, but more so." (Quayson 2007: 156) Concurringly we could say that Michael K has reached a similar transcendent humanity,

[86] "On the one hand, he performs all the predatory instincts of a carnivore without any sentimentality. Yet on the other, the silence and frailty of his person allows others to interpret him as bearing a resemblance to the lives of animals and therefore of carrying an excess of religious connotations. Like animals, insects, and birds, he is not of the human world. Thus the various points at which he is described as being asleep are supposed to mark his otherness from the world and proximity to that of animals. And yet this association with animals also means he is subhuman; the fog of stupidity that he refers to at least twice over the course of the novel references his animalhood yet registers his recoil from that ontological state." (Quayson 2007: 171)

taking the reader by the hand to accompany him on his way. It is up to the reader how far he is willing to go:

> […] he wondered whether by now, with his filthy clothes and his air of gaunt exhaustion, he would not be passed over as a mere footloose vagrant from the depths of the country, too benighted to know that one needed papers to be on the road, too sunk in apathy to be of harm. (39)

Michael K is suspended between disappearing from the world and reaching out to others. His physical transformation towards an animal state and towards a communion with nature is contrasted with his numerous encounters with others, each of which illustrates his social status in some way or other, ranging from instant rejection to instant acceptance.

The outspokenness of the narrative creates and reinforces the impression of Michael K as mute or speechless, but a second reading reveals him to be quite willing to communicate, but wary of other people's intentions; and, regarding his environment, quite rightfully so. His muteness can be related to the silence wilfully adopted by ANC members in the face of apartheid rule; comparable also to the resistance in Nazi Germany, or for all that counts to almost any resistance movement. It follows the logic of oppression: the oppressive regime mutes all resistance, while the resistance tries to find its voice and a place to speak, always wary of the regime's brutality in subduing dissent. Members of resistance can never know whether their interlocutor is sympathetic to their cause or might betray them to the oppressive regime. Though Michael K is a figure of resistance, his resistance does not take place in the public political arena of sabotage and gunfights, but on a more private and individual level by refusing to be incorporated into the system of classification imposed on him like on all other South Africans.

### 2.5.1 Michael K Embodied

While Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee experience their bodies as inconvenient and cumbersome additions to their mental apparatus, the body is staged as the shared substrate of all human beings in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, as shown in the encounter between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl and in the scenes of torture. The body of Michael K is foregrounded in a different manner. The very opening of the narrative is indicative for the rest of Michael K's life: "The first thing the midwife noticed […] was that he had a hare lip. The lip curled like a snail's foot, the left nostril gaped." (LTMK 3)[87] *In brevis* Coetzee relates how Michael grows up: "Year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother polish

[87] Coetzee 1998 [1983]. All quotes in section 2.5 will be from LTMK unless indicated otherwise.

other people's floors, learning to be quiet." (3-4) Most of his youth is spent in the children's home Huis Norenius, of which memories resurface now and then in K's narrative.

After a very short exposition (merely one and a half pages) Coetzee picks up the main storyline. K is employed by the City of Cape Town as a gardener "in the thirty-first year of his [K's] life." (6) He lives with his mother, who suffers from dropsy (the observable swelling from fluid accumulation in body tissues): "The needs of her body became a source of torment." (5) The physical suffering of his mother gives even more emphasis to the body. Michael K senses his duty towards his mother, and assumes that "he had been brought into the world to look after his mother." (7) The mother proposes a return to the countryside where she spent her childhood (at "a farm in the district of Prince Albert," in the Little Karoo; MK 7), and K eagerly picks up her idea. He attempts to buy train tickets, but the process proves highly complicated and time-consuming, so that K soon gives up. After spending some more evenings "sitting in the dark listening to his mother breathe," (10) he constructs a wheelchair of sorts – displaying mechanical understanding and even prowess – and wheels his mother out of town, only to be sent back by the first roadblock sentries they encounter. In a second attempt he succeeds to leave the city behind, trying hard to avoid roadblocks and patrols.

This arduous procedure places a strong emphasis on the physical bodies of Michael K and his mother. The sobriety of the situation outweighs its comical potential, since the reader is not invited to be amused but to engage with Michael K's seriousness in complying with his mother's wish to return to a farm where she grew up. They get no further than Stellenbosch before his mother succumbs to the hard journey and dies in the hospital. Michael K is unexpectedly confronted with her somewhat surprising demise:

> "Do you want to make a phone call?" said the doctor.
> This was evidently a code for something, he did not know what. He shook his head.
> Someone brought him a cup of tea, which he drank. People hovering over him made him nervous. He clasped his hands and stared hard at his feet. Was he expected to say something? He separated his hands and clasped them, over and over. (30-31)

Clueless as to what to do next, he remains at the hospital. Without his mother he has lost the sense of purpose that had driven him so far. When he is asked about his mother, he begins to explain the purpose of their trip: "Then he began to fear he was giving away too much, and would answer no more questions." (31) He roams around, until a nurse approaches him. She addresses him by his first name Michael, and informs him it is time to leave, giving him his mother's ashes and some toiletries: "She looked him candidly in the eye and gave him a smile." (32) The matter-of-fact tone is a code Michael K can understand, but not really relate to. The empathy his loss calls for is to be provided by someone not present, someone to be

called on the telephone; but Michael has nobody to call. Coetzee does not invite us to feel much empathy for him, for he seems to take the news fairly well, even in a slightly apathetic fashion. This lack of feeling complies with his generally lacking sense of community – he does not belong to any group of people. The only one he had was his mother. On receiving her ashes Michael K imagines the cremation of his mother along with the "old women from the ward":

> So there is a place for burning, K thought. He imagined the old women from the ward fed one after another, eyes pinched against the heat, lips pinched, hands at their sides, into the fiery furnace. First the hair, in a halo of flame, then after a while everything else, to the last things, burning and crumbling. And it was happening all the time. "How do I know?" he said. "How do you know what?" the nurse said. Impatiently he indicated the box. "How do I know?" he challenged. She refused to answer, or did not understand. (32)

Again we see Michael's lack of understanding clash with the impersonal routine of the hospital personnel. Most of the staff are helpful, but in an empty way.[88] The ashes he has received replace her body in a way Michael finds hard to understand. So far the narrative presented two bodies, reflected by the focalizing consciousness of Michael K. After the second body has been reduced to ashes, only Michael K remains as embodied character. The focus of the narrative, and with it the focus of Michael K, shifts exclusively to his physical embodiment. From this point onwards, hardly any specific descriptions of other human bodies are offered; instead, plants and animals become the only external objects receiving close scrutiny (minor exceptions granted). With this shift of focus, Michael K's experience of himself as embodied character moves to the centre of the narrative. His bodily needs become the central aspect of his embodiment, sleep and hunger are central themes in his search for inner and outer tranquillity and serenity.

### 2.5.2 Embodied Needs

#### Sleep

Michael K resumes his journey to the farm half-heartedly. Being on his own, he discovers himself in new ways. One aspect of his new self is his capacity for sleep:

> With nothing to do, he slept more and more. He discovered that he could sleep anywhere, at any time, in any position: on the sidewalk at noon, with people stepping over his body; standing against a wall, with the suitcase between his legs. Sleep settled inside his head like a benign fog; for he had no will to resist it. He did not dream of anyone or anything. (34)

[88] The goodwill displayed here will be explored on a greater scale in Coetzee to date latest novel *The Childhoood of Jesus* (2013).

Sleep becomes ubiquitous, a "benign fog." In my discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians* I had suggested that sleep might open avenues to the subconscious levels of the Magistrate, reflecting his inner journey. This does not seem to be the case with Michael K. Throughout the narrative there are hardly any signs of deeper layers of consciousness, no markers of internal struggles. The self-reflection of the protagonist shared with the reader is anchored mainly in the experience of his physical being. And his physical body proves to be strong and persevering, even under dire conditions: "He carried the suitcase on a stick over his shoulder. He had not eaten for two days; however, there seemed no limit to his endurance." (35) On his way through the countryside – after choosing to avoid the roads – he feeds like an animal from a trough he comes across, from which he scoops "crushed mealies and bonemeal," coming to the premature conclusion: "At last I am living off the land." (46). He climbs a hill and rests, thinking:

> I could live here forever, he thought, or till I die. Nothing would happen, every day would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing to say. The anxiety that belonged to the time on the road began to leave him. Sometimes, as he walked, he did not know whether he was awake or asleep. […] he wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet. Perhaps if one flew high enough, he thought, one would be able to see. (46-47)

Again the reader is reminded of Michael K's sense of time as a permanently present moment, an eternal now with a fleeting consciousness oscillating between wakefulness and sleep. This state also characterizes the way in which he remembers past incidents, such as getting a lift by a farmer, of whom he remembers only minute fragments: "His memories all seemed to be of parts, not of wholes." (49)[89] He finally arrives at Prince Albert: "K sat down on the stoep with his back to the mesh and closed his eyes against the sun. Now I am here, he thought. Finally." (50) Added to the immediacy of his experience of time as an ever-present now, his sense of space becomes an ever-present here.

Having reached the abandoned farmhouse of the Visagies (who might or might not be the people his mother referred to), he thinks: "Now I am here, he thought. Or at least I am somewhere. He went to sleep." (52) In his first night on the farm, his sleep brings him dreams of the children's home where he grew up, Huis Norenius. The dream transports him back in time and space, disrupting his present time and space. This dream and other recollections of his traumatizing childhood are the only psychological introspections granted to the reader. At

[89] This is one of several occasions where the contrast between narrated events and Michael K's experience of them becomes apparent. The encounter is narrated together with some dialogue, but without any descriptive details. After this, one sentence moves the narrative on to his hiding place at night, immediately followed by his recollection of the encounter: "Remembering the farmer afterwards, he could recall only the gabardine hat and the stubby fingers that beckoned him. On each joint of each finger was a little feather of bronze hair." (49)

other times, sleep remains simply a drifting away of consciousness: "His eyelids grew heavy. I am falling, he thought." (56)[90]

After the return of the young Visagie, who is on the run, and the danger of being imposed on by the returned owner of the farm, Michael K elopes to the nearby mountains and finds a cave. There he sits or lies in stupor at the mouth of the cave, too tired to move or perhaps too lackadaisical. He sleeps through whole afternoons, wondering if he is living in what was known as bliss. (68) The episode in the cave raises Michael K's sleepfulness to the level of meditation: "Now, in front of his cave, he sometimes locked his fingers behind his head, closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing." (69)

Later Michael K is taken to a detainment camp, where something like a friendship develops with a man named Robert, who comments: "'I have never seen anyone as asleep as you,' Robert said. 'Yes,' replied K, struck that Robert too had seen it." (84) It is one of the rare moments when we get a sense of empathy building up between two characters. It remains for us, as readers, to inhabit the perspective of Michael K and develop our empathy for him through the use of our sympathetic imagination while sharing his experiences, narrated to us in the third person, which allows the necessary distance to avoid identification but yet feel close to him. Another scene in the camp illustrates how children treating his body indifferently signal a particular form of acceptance:

> He lay so still that the smaller children, having first kept their distance, next tried to rouse him, and, when he would not be roused, incorporated his body into their game. They clambered over him and fell upon him as if he were part of the earth. Still hiding his face, he rolled over and found that he could doze even with little bodies riding on his back. He found unexpected pleasure in these games. It felt to him that he was drawing health from the children's touch […] (84)

Imagine the reader as one of these children, at first keeping a distance, then urged to rouse him, and finally incorporating his body into the game of reading. Michael K's light sleep allows him to accept this proximity, a mode of acceptance on the physical level that strongly contrasts with the repeated mentioning of the attention his harelip receives. The pleasure experienced by him and the feeling of drawing health from it are both signs of a functional mode of acceptance, both on the side of the children and the reader, as well as on the side of Michael K himself.

[90] The sense of falling in connection with sleep will return more prominently in *The Master of Petersburg*, where it is linked to Dostoevsky's epileptic fits.

**Killing Animals and Planting Pumpkins**

As Michael K leaves the city of Cape Town behind and enters the countryside, the veld, he is faced with having to provide himself with food. At first he attempts an Hobbesian approach of killing animals for sustenance: "In the fading light he was lucky enough to bring down a turtle-dove with a stone as it came to roost in a thorntree. He twisted its neck, cleaned it, roasted it on a skewer of wire, and ate it with the last can of beans." (46)[91] Michael K crosses the threshold between urban living and nature, entering the animal kingdom and leaving his urban self behind. The matter-of-factness of the killing shows two things: 1) His aptitude 2) His non-empathetic relation to animals. Ato Quayson comments on Michael K's adaptation to animal nature, relating it to his silence and to his sleep:

> On the one hand, he performs all the predatory instincts of a carnivore without any sentimentality. Yet on the other, the silence and frailty of his person allows others to interpret him as bearing a resemblance to the lives of animals and therefore of carrying an excess of religious connotations. Like animals, insects, and birds, he is not of the human world. Thus the various points at which he is described as being asleep are supposed to mark his otherness from the world and proximity to that of animals. And yet this association with animals also means he is subhuman; the fog of stupidity that he refers to at least twice over the course of the novel references his animalhood yet registers his recoil from that ontological state. (Quayson 2007: 171)

The turtle dove remains a minor incident in the narrative. The bird receives almost no attention and is devoured within the second sentence. At the farm Michael K makes an experience which makes a strong impression on him, and possibly also on the reader. He chases the goats roaming the farm, finally managing to catch one in the water at the dam. Unlike the dove, which was brought down by a lucky throw with a stone and had its neck twisted in the next moment, the goat puts up a hard struggle, described in all the details of an embodied one-on-one fight:

> K hurled the whole weight of his body upon it. I must be hard, the thought came to him, I must press through to the end, I must not relent. He could feel the goat's hindquarters heaving beneath him; it bleated again and again in terror; its body jerked in spasms. K straddled it, clenched his hands around its neck, and bore down upon with all his strength, pressing the head under the surface of the water and into the thick ooze below. The hindquarters thrashed, but his knees were gripping the body like a vice. There was a moment when the kicking began to weaken and he almost let up. But the impulse passed. Long after the last snort and tremor he continued to press the goat's head under the mud. Only when the cold of the water had begun to numb his limbs did he rise and drag himself out. (53-54)

Michael K's act of killing is shown as a hard struggle, in its lack of premeditation seemingly savage, but certainly recognizable as agony on the side of the ewe, a struggle Elizabeth Costello would have appreciated as bringing across the terror of death in an animal, showing

[91] Compare this to Jacobus Coetzee's childhood memory of being ordered to kill a bird. (DL 105)

its "electric being" in its final struggle. Michael K returns to the farmhouse without the dead ewe, wet, cold, and exhausted. The next day he returns to the dam and retrieves the dead body, only to sense that what had driven him the previous day (hunger?) was now leaving him at the sight of the dead body and the distorted mien of the goat:

> The urgency of the hunger that had possessed him yesterday was gone. […] He found it hard to believe that he had spent a day chasing after them like a madman with a knife. He had a vision of himself riding the ewe to death under the mud by the light of the moon, and shuddered. He would have liked to bury the ewe somewhere and forget the episode; or else, best of all, to slap the creature on its haunch and see it scramble to its feet and trot off. (55)

The "vision of himself" marks a minor shift of perspective; it is one of the seldom moments where Michael K gains a reflective perspective on himself that is not rooted in his past, but instead provides a nocturnal vision of madness, an act of the imagination. The wish to revive the dead body summons the frogs of Dulgannon and their resurrection after months of hiding in the caked mud of a dry river, as Elizabeth Costello points out to the jury in "At the Gate." (EC 216f.)

Notwithstanding his feelings of guilt or disgust, Michael K cleans the animal, removes guts and organs, and fries a haunch over an open fire. Afterwards he feels a little sick, thinking he might have caught a cold, and goes to fetch water at the dam. He takes a moment to sit down:

> Sitting in the bare veld with his head between his knees he allowed himself to imagine lying in a clean bed between crisp white sheets. He coughed, and gave a little hoot like an owl, and heard the sound depart from him without the trace of an echo. Though his throat hurt, he made the sound again. It was the first time he had heard his own voice since Prince Albert. He thought: Here I can make any sound I like. (56)

The opposition of "crisp white sheets" and "a little hoot like an owl" shows his progressive return to a state of nature, where his own voice happens to sound like a bird of the night. After he recovers from his cold, he realizes that the goat will not provide him with food for long: "The goat in the pantry was stinking. The lesson, if there was a lesson, if there were lessons embedded in events, seemed to be not to kill such large animals." (57)

He checks the perimeter of the farm and continues to sleep in the house, even though he was "not at ease there. Roaming from one empty room to another he felt as insubstantial as air. He sang to himself and heard his voice echo from wall and ceilings." (58) Michael K finds joy in expression, before in hooting like an owl (with no echo), and now singing to himself (with an echo). He remains attached to his former way of living, but already senses that the house is not the right place for him. Later in the narrative he will build a burrow for himself and enjoy the reunion with earth (similar to the Friday in Michel Tournier's rewriting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique*, 1968).

Michael K buries the ashes of his mother in the soil of the farm, and Coetzee lets the reader know, in the aggrandizing tone of an epic: “This was the beginning of his life as a cultivator.” (59) Followed closely by: “I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature.” (59) While waiting for the pumpkins he plants to grow, Michael K lives on a diet of birds, which he kills with a catapult. (59) We read about a man attempting to live on his own terms, without interference by others, “in a pocket outside time.” (60) We see Michael K direct his attention to the earth and the pumpkins he nourishes as if they were his children.

### 2.5.3 The Hermit

> He thought: Now surely I have come as far as a man can come; surely no one will be mad enough to cross these plains, climb these mountains, search these rocks to find me; surely now that in all the world only I know where I am, I can think of myself as lost.
> Everything else was behind him. When he awoke in the morning he faced only the single huge block of the day, one day at a time. He thought of himself as a termite boring its way through a rock. There seemed nothing to do but live. He sat so still that it would not have startled him if birds had flown down and perched on his shoulders. (66)

After the farm proved to be not as remote a refuge as imagined by Michael K, he relocates to the mountain range above Prince Albert. Immersing himself in nature, he is happy to finally feel “lost”. By getting lost he manages to retain a more natural self, away from the categorizations of society which place him on a low rung of the social strata. He finds a cave and remains there for an indeterminate time. The birds perching on his shoulder point to the legend of Franz of Assisi and his communion with nature. Michael K, however, likens himself to an impossible insect, a rock termite, whose appetite cannot be satisfied: “He felt hungry but did nothing about it. Instead of listening to the crying of his body he tried to listen to the great silence about him.” (66) The fasting cleanses him of desire: “Whatever the nature of the beast that had howled inside him, it was starved into stillness.” (68) His assimilation to inanimate nature is reflected in his interior monologue:

> I am becoming a different kind of man, he thought, if there are two kinds of man. If I were cut, he thought, holding his wrists out, looking at his wrists, the blood would no longer gush from me but seep, and after a little seeping dry and heal. I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day. (67)

The body of Michael K becomes the tool of his transformation, of his immersion into inanimate nature. The experience of growing hunger (in between he eats some ant grubs and some flowers) is accompanied by long periods of sleep: “Now, in front of his cave, he sometimes locked his fingers behind his head, closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing.” (69) Emptied of all desire, his mind wanders to Wynberg Park, to the hunger experienced in Huis Norenius, to the Visagie boy hiding on the farm. Ultimately, his body signals its demise and Michael K suddenly decides to climb down

the mountain. This almost religious experience of nature has not transformed him after all. We see no change in his personality, no change in his approaches. In Prince Albert he is picked up by the police and transferred to a camp: "I am like an ant that does not know where its hole is, he thought." (83) The image of the hole, here used synonymously for home, is later used to describe Michael K's self-understanding:

> Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (110)

This meta-commentary on K's reasoning reveals the extradiegetic position of the narrative voice, which here clearly transcends what Michael K could possibly express; and thereby the narrative provides the reader with a warning regarding the reliability of Michael K's thoughts. Interestingly, this is immediately followed by a memory of the classroom at Huis Norenius, where Michael K is "[n]umb with terror" (110) when confronted with a math exercise. Shortly before it had resurfaced in the context of reflecting on bringing up children in these times: "My father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was 'There will be silence in dormitories at all times,' […]" (104-105) The meta-commentary is thereby in direct neighbourhood with a recollection of the traumatic homestead of his childhood and youth, whereby it is marked as authoritarian. Michael K's attempt to escape from society and retreat to the mountains to live the life of a hermit gives expression to his terror.

### 2.5.4 The Gardener

The burying of his mother marks a turning point for Michael K: "This was the beginning of his life as a cultivator." (59) In the abandoned farmhouse he finds a packet of pumpkin seeds.[92]

> His deepest pleasure came at sunset when he turned open the cock at the dam wall and watched the stream of water run down its channels to soak the earth, turning it from fawn to deep brown. It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature. […] The impulse to plant had been reawakened in him; now, in a matter of weeks, he found his waking life bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate and the seeds he had planted there. (59)

Of course we cannot miss the symbolic character of Michael K's acts of restoration, both of the abandoned farmland and of himself. It is also telling that Michael K limits his efforts to a

[92] Imagine Michael K stranding on the island previously inhabited by Cruso and Friday (*Foe*), finding ready-made terraces where to plant his seeds.

manageable section of land, making use of the skill he had acquired as a gardener; unfortunately these didn't include knowledge of aquifers:

> The borehole, pumped dry, yielded only a weak and intermittent stream. It became K's deepest wish for the flow of water from the earth to be restored. He pumped only as much as his garden needed, allowing the level in the dam to drop to a few inches and watching without emotion as the marsh dried up, the mud caked, the grass withered, the frogs turned on their backs and died. He did not know how underground waters replenished themselves but knew it was bad to be prodigal. He could not imagine what lay beneath his feet, a lake or a running stream or a vast inner sea or a pool so deep it had no bottom. Every time he released the brake and the wheel spun and water came, it seemed to him a miracle; he hung over the dam wall, closed his eyes, and held his fingers in the stream. (60)

This passage reveals Michael K's single-mindedness. While being careful not to be prodigal with the water needed for his plants, he is prodigal with the immediate environment of the dam – neglecting the withering of life ("watching without emotion") and instead being amazed about the miracle of water reappearing from the depths.

Reappearing from nowhere, the Visagie grandson disrupts his tranquillity and forces him away. For a last time, he irrigates his field, and as readers we get a sense of the emotional attachment that has formed between him and the little patch of earth he has begun to cultivate:

> The first stubby pumpkin leaves were pushing through the earth, one here, one there. K opened the sluice for the last time ad watched the water wash slowly across the field, turning the earth dark. Now when I am most needed, he thought, I abandon my children. (63)

Michael K, who himself has grown up in a state of abandonment, is now forced to abandon his own "children". Even when living as a hermit his thoughts reach out to the pumpkins: "There was a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam and must be cut. It seemed to him that one could cut a chord like that only so many times before it would not grow again." (65-66) The familiarity Michael K feels for this little piece of land emphasizes his emotional attachment:

> Every stone, every bush along the way he recognized. He felt at home at the dam as he had never felt in the house. […] I want to live here, he thought: I want to live here forever, where my mother and my grandmother lived. It is as simple as that. What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast. A man who wants to live cannot live in a house with lights in the windows. He must live in a hole and hide by day. A man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living. That is what it has come to. (98-99)

Having removed himself from human company, he has established ties to the earth and what it brings forth. We see him direct his entire attention to the plants, and we can sense how it fulfils him:

> As he tended the seeds and watched and waited for the earth to bear food, his own need for food grew slighter and slighter.[…] When food comes out of this earth, he told himself, I will recover my appetite, for it will have savour. (101)

The undernourished body of Michael K lets him feel "a deep joy in his physical being," (102) adding to his air of transcendence: "His step was so light that he barely touched the earth. It seemed possible to fly; it seemed possible to be both body and spirit." (102) At this stage Michael K is primarily a body, while his voice no longer reaches out to others, instead only his thoughts and actions reach the reader in the form of narrative text. The reader reads how K returns to "eating insects" and "roots": "He had no fear of being poisoned, for he seemed to know the difference between a benign bitterness and a malign one, as though he had once been an animal and the knowledge of good and bad plants had not died in his soul." (102) His assimilation to an animal state progresses, intensifying when he decides to sleep during the day and only venture out at night, so that when he withdraws from the daylight it is "with a strange green glow behind his eyelids." (105) Michael K's physical state and the descriptions of it offered to the reader oscillate between fauna and flora. He develops a symbiotic relationship to the plants he is tending, while simultaneously adopting the behaviour of an animal and developing his animal instincts – as indicated by his growing distrust towards humans and fear of their intrusion ("more timorous than a mouse," 105), and as when he grows accustomed to moving around in darkness: "Like a worm he began to slither towards his hole, thinking only: Let darkness fall soon, let the earth swallow me up and protect me." (107)

His life as a cultivator comes close to a (sacred) communion with earth, to which he wishes to return; underlying this is a sense of infantile regression into the lap of the mother – tellingly the burrow he builds resembles just that, lodged as it is between two ridges. In the mountains Michael K had rid himself of desire, had freed himself of the societal constraints imposed on him previously, had reduced himself to being a body and approached an animal state. When a group of rebels takes up residence in the abandoned farmhouse, he for a moment considers joining them, but instead hopes they leave soon and chooses "to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children." (109) After they have left, Michael notices the damage their donkeys had done to his plants: "I am like a woman whose children have left the house, he thought: all that remains is to tidy up and listen to the silence." (111) Not surprisingly Michael K prefers to assume a maternal role in regard to the plants, and this train of thought is continued when he discovers two pale melons growing: "It seemed to him that he loved these two, which he thought of as two sisters, even more than the pumpkins, which he thought of as a band of brothers." (113) As if to compensate the loss of his mother, Michael K assumes a maternal role and adopts the plants as his new family. In an

almost cruel and ironic twist, his "firstborn" pumpkin gets cut to pieces and roasted on the fire. Underlying the detailed description of this first meal is a feeling of gratitude, when Michael K's "felt his heart suddenly flow over with thankfulness. It was exactly as they had described it, like a gush of warm water." (113) Who "they" could be remains unknown, but our emotions are always dependent on templates received by others. If we have no idea that a heart can "overflow" with anything, we will not be able to identify such a gust of emotion; here we can see that Michael K has been attentive to the people surrounding him, has been able to incorporate the displays of emotions: "He chewed with tears of joy in his eyes." (113) The positive emotions flooding him allow him for the first time to truly enjoy the consumption of food since departing from Cape Town: "For the first time since he had arrived in the country he found pleasure in eating." (113)

His nocturnal lifestyle leads to a deterioration of his sight, but also to a heightened sense of smell and touch; again bringing him closer to animal nature. This is countered by remembrances of his mother (again, doubts about having found the right farm crop up, 116) and the realization that all people have been someone's child at one point – K applies this to his mother and grandmother: "I come from a line of children without end." (117) Having thus reintroduced himself into a line of human ancestors, his animal state retreats and he even considers the usefulness of a fence to protect his pumpkins and melons. And his body begins to show symptoms of malnourishment: bleeding gums and frequent giddiness. He tries to resort to killing birds again, but has lost the skill, so instead kills a lizard and eats it; while just one page earlier he had compared himself to one: "Like a parasite dozing in the gut, he thought; like a lizard under a stone." (116)

Michael K harvests thirty pumpkins, gets to eat the two melons, but yet his body continues to deteriorate. Sleep and hunger take over and immobilize him: "He raised a hand as heavy as lead and put it over his heart: far away, as if in another country, he felt a languid stretching and closing." (118) The heart is reduced to a pumping mechanism; no longer does it harbour emotions. The sleep brings dreams of an old man telling him to get off the land and of his mother taking a walk with him. "It occurred to him that he might not be fully in possession of himself." (119) After finally having achieved what at first seemed so unlikely, i.e. living off the land, his body fails to enjoy this in a sustainable fashion. The involuntary dispossession of the self bears unwelcome consequences of estrangement from the land he has grown so attached to: "Everything was familiar, yet he felt like a stranger or a ghost." (120) Coetzee offers the reader one last reminder of K's animal being before he gets picked up by the military: "[O]n hands and knees he drank from a puddle." (120) One of the soldiers picks up

one of his arms: “K did not pull away. The arm felt like something alien, a stick protruding from his body.” (121) The soldiers search the entire farm, blow up the house and bury numerous landmines; Michael K feels his attachment to the earth in which he had planted his “children”: “The sight of the stranger digging up his earth agitated him more than he would have guessed.” (123)

Michael K remains a gardener at heart. The experiment of discovering his animal nature had made place for his self-chosen role as cultivator. And even though he succeeds in growing his own food, his body ultimately cannot keep up. Michael K is about to collapse when finally the soldiers arrive, preventing him from returning himself to the same earth to which he had returned his mother, instead forcing him back into the company of others.

### 2.5.5 Encounters

The grand narrative of *Life & Times of Michael K* presents the protagonist as an outsider, traumatized in his childhood; “an alienated individual, who has problems with relating to other people,” as Liliana Sikorska puts it (Sikorska 2006: 90). Michael’s life story tells us more about the society we live in than about Michael K himself and is undercut in more than one way by the narrative style of Coetzee. Michael K makes a variety of encounters, which illustrate both his own social awkwardness and the awkwardness of social conditions.

#### Stellenbosch

After his mother has died, Michael K roams the streets of Stellenbosch when he is overtaken by a man on a cart.

> For a while they were moving side by side. The old man gave a little nod; and K, hesitating a moment, peering down the long straight avenue of mist, found that there was after all nothing any more to keep him. So he hoisted himself up and took his place beside the old man. ‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘If you need help I can help.’
> But the old man did not need help, nor was he in the mood for talk. He dropped K off a mile past the top of the pass and turned off down a dirt track. (35)

This occurs just shortly after K has left the hospital, where he found it hard to understand procedures and the communication with the personnel. Now we see him pick up a simple non-verbal communication, a mere nod, understanding it correctly as an invitation to hop on. He politely offers his help in return for the favour, but receives no reply. Soon after, K is dropped off. This episode gives little cause for empathy neither on the character level nor on the level of reader and writer. However, it shows that Michael K is capable of easy interaction with

others. One might suspect the South African colour line at work that has stunted communication with apprehension and misunderstanding.

**On the Road**

After passing a convoy, "[…] a soldier in camouflage uniform stepped from behind the bushes pointing an automatic rifle at his heart. K stopped in his tracks. The soldier lowered his rifle, lit a cigarette, took a puff, and raised the rifle again. Now, K judged, it pointed at his face, or at his throat." (36) In short succession the soldier marks the areas affected by the violence rampaging the country: the heart, the face, the throat. All three are vital for a communication in the spirit of empathy. He robs K, whose "heart thundered in his chest." (37) Both his heart and his voice are very much alive, but disempowered by the gun.

**Laingsburg**

Any encounter offers the opportunity of taking another's perspective, of sharing a perspective, of developing a new perspective onto oneself. The least it does is creating a moment of shared attention. In the next encounter to be discussed here, Michael K is confronted with a variety of perspectives, none of which he is able to share; nonetheless, the encounter proceeds in an amiable fashion, in a spirit of goodwill. On his way along the highway he passes Laingsburg, where a young man warns him about the curfew. "K turned. He saw a man younger than himself wearing a green and gold track suit and carrying a wooden tool-chest. What the stranger saw he did not know." (47) Michael lacks a self-image which could be accessed through empathetic perspective-taking, all he has is his perspective onto the world as it is presented to him. To the young man he states his desire to continue on his way to Prince Albert.

> But he went home with the stranger after all and slept at his house, after a meal of soup and pan-bread. There were three children. All the while K ate, the youngest, a girl, sat on her mother's lap staring and, though her mother whispered in her ear, would not take her eyes off him. The two older children kept their gaze severely on their plates. After hesitating, K spoke of his journey. (48)

The easiness of hospitality being offered and accepted prompts Michael K to offer his story in return. The child staring at him would recall memories of previous people and children staring at his cleft lip, thus his hesitation. For the first time Michael K gets to enjoy an act of hospitality outside of a hospital. "People must help each other, that's what I believe," says the man and prompts Michael to ponder:

> K let this utterance sink into his mind. Do I believe in helping people? he wondered. He might help people, he might not help them, he did not know beforehand, anything was possible. He did not seem to have a belief, or did not seem to have a belief regarding help. Perhaps I am the stony ground, he thought. (48)[93]

Like Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, Michael K has come to perceive himself as infertile ground in regard to his social environment. In this scene we get a feeling for the traumatization Michael K has gone through; his heart is sound, but his means of expression are under-developed, at least in speech, if not in thought, as we can observe when he tries to express his gratitude the next morning.

> At the table the urge again came over him to speak. He gripped the edge of the table and sat stiffly upright. His heart was full, he wanted to utter his thanks, but finally the right words would not come. The children stared at him; a silence fell; their parents looked away. (48)

The description of the body preparing for speech, but the mouth failing to utter the words, can make the readers experience Michael's tension in their own body via sympathetic imagination. The economy of looks marks the end of the encounter: Staring and looking away interspersed with silence. With all three modes of non-engagement Michael K has been familiarized since his infancy. This final tableau of Michael K and the host family can be read either as a keeping of decorum or as a failure of Michael K to express his 'language of the heart' as fully as he would like to. This scene shows Michael K's stunted self-confidence in a friendly environment. The narrative navigation enhances the empathetic experience. The setting of the scene and the description of the constellation of looks and glances, in combination with the silence of his heart, raise our awareness of Michael K's position in the world. He spoke of his journey, but from his heart he said close to nothing.

### On the Farm

The encounter with the Visagie grandson provides a more antagonistic scenario. Visagie immediately assumes an air of authority, and Michael K is transported back into his infantile position of impotence: "He felt the old hopeless stupidity invading him, which he tried to beat back." (60) The readers witness Michael's readily accepted humiliation by his internal commentary:

> He truly thinks I am an idiot, thought K. He thinks I am an idiot who sleeps on the floor like an animal and lives on birds and lizards and does not know there is such a thing as money. He looks at the badge on my beret and asks himself what child gave it to me out of what lucky packet. (62)

The Visagie grandson complains about Michael not being cooperative and his words together with his gaze makes Michael K helpless once again:

[93] Cf. Elizabeth Costello's statement on belief in "At the Gate." (EC 216ff)

> He turned his gaze on K.
> The words, whatever they stood for, accusation, threat, reprimand, seemed to K to smother him. It is nothing but a manner, he told himself: be calm. Nevertheless he felt stupidity creep over him like a fog again. He no longer knew what to do with his face. He rubbed his mouth and stared at the grandson's brown boots, thinking: You can't buy boots like that in the shops anymore. (64)

The extreme discomfort of Michael K is tangible, and the motion of the "stupidity" that moves "like a fog" from his mind to his face and mouth, which leads him to affirm his deformed lip (like a mark of shame) by rubbing it, his eyes moving to the ground indicating humility. The tight economy of the narrative prose is finely attuned to the emotional atmosphere of the scene, presenting to the reader a complex encounter. Luckily, Michael K abandons the Visagie grandson and the farm and moves on.

**In the Camp**

Michael K is picked up after his episode in the mountains and deported to the internment camp Jakkalsdrif, which brings up memories from his childhood in Huis Norenius: "It is like going back to childhood, he thought: it is like a nightmare." (77) Climbing out of the police van he enters the camp "under the eyes of a hundred curious inmates, adults and children." (73) In the afternoon, perched on his bunk, Michael K for the first time has trouble finding sleep, thinking to himself: "I am back in Huis Norenius a second time, only now I am too old to bear it." But then somebody touches his bare arm. Michael K flinches, and hears a man's voice asking whether he is alright: "Against the dazzle of light from the doorway he could not make out the face."[94] Michael K replies with words that "seemed to come from far away. […] K thought: I needed more warning. I should have been told I was going to be sent back amongst people." (74) That evening a "dark shape" enters the hut and approaches him – as readers we readily assume this to be the same man as before, now offering K a cigarette. He accepts it and in the light of the match sees a "man older than himself." (77) This notion signifies his rough classification system of other men as either older or younger than himself – a deeply ingrained respect for elders might be one cause for this first consideration. The old man convinces Michael K to join the crowd outside. Besieged by their questions, Michael K tells his story (here consisting of bringing his mother to Prince Albert, her dying on the way at Stellenbosch, and working on the railways). He feels that the burying of his mother's ashes would round off the story, but cannot bring himself to share that intimate moment with the crowd, whose attention dissipates quickly. The "man from the hut" ("His name was Robert."

[94] Coetzee uses this staging of a face outlined by light repeatedly, prominently so in Friday's first encounter with Susan Barton (FOE 5).

79) shares the story of him and his family with Michael. For the first time someone makes an effort to include Michael K, treating him like a friend and not a stranger.

Returning from a shift of forced labour, Michael K falls into a "dead sleep," interrupted by the crying of a baby: "Aching to sleep, K felt anger mount up inside himself. He lay with his fists clenched against his breast, wishing the child annihilated." (88-89) Michael K bodily mirrors the position of the baby, but fails to develop the affect into a positive emotional response of care; instead he selfishly wishes the baby dead. Instead of intellectually grasping the baby's situation he mirrors not only its position but also its self-centeredness. At this point Robert tells the story of a district nurse visiting the camp after it was opened, and how appalled she was by the miserable conditions in the camp, so that she just "stood in the middle of the camp where everyone could see, and she cried." (88) This public display of emotions doubles the crying of the baby in the night. Robert explains to Michael K how the consequent improvements to the situation in the camp were only intended to appease the conscience of those in power: "They want to go to sleep feeling good." (88) Michael K signalizes doubt, and Robert urges him: "'You don't look deep enough […]. Take a good look in their hearts, then you'll see.'" (88) To a shrugging Michael he remarks:

> "You're a baby," said Robert. "You've been asleep all your life. It's time to wake up. Why do you think they give you charity, you and the children? Because they think you are harmless, your eyes aren't opened, you don't see the truth around you." (88-89)

The motif of the baby carries over into the next paragraph of the narrative, where the reader is informed that two days later the baby that had cried in the night died. Is the baby a signifier of the truth Robert had been talking about? Was Michael K to blame for the death, after having wished the baby dead? (87) For hours he observes the mother sitting beside her tent, withdrawn from the world, refusing food and not crying. The crying has found its end with the baby's death.

> Is this my education? he wondered. Am I at last learning about life here in a camp? It seemed to him that scene after scene of life was playing itself out before him and that all the scenes cohered. He had a presentiment of a single meaning upon which they were converging or threatening to converge, though he did not know yet what that might be. (89)

This interior monologue of Michael K functions like a meta-commentary on previous events in the camp. Coetzee has given the reader an almost didactic presentation of life and death in the camp. And along with the socio-critical commentary, Coetzee has provided the reader with a set of perspectives, reflected in the dialogue or refracted by Michael K's central consciousness. It is not Michael K who learns to understand but the reader. The reader is led through infantile regression towards death's finality, both starting and ending points of consciousness. The "single meaning" remains attached to the grieving mother, in who

Michael K continues to show intense interest: "K's first thought each morning was: Will I see her today?" (89) In one short sentence she is assessed as "short and fat" and as having been abandoned by the father of the baby. Michael K now discovers what the single meaning could possibly be:

> K wondered whether he was at last in love. Then after three days the girl re-emerged and resumed her life. Seeing her in the midst of other people, K could detect no sign that she was different from them. He never spoke to her. (89)

Michael K stumbles across a central emotional pull, but displaces it as attached to the grieving mother, while it was rather directed at more than just her. His heart was reaching out to her like it had previously at the breakfast table of his hosts. However, the moment passes and the narrative moves on to a fire in Prince Albert and a brutal police raid of Jakkalsdrif. In the commotion of collapsing tents and people being forcefully removed, Michael K sits next to a woman with two children and a baby. Michael K offers the younger children to sit with him:

> Without taking her eyes from the destruction being visited on them, she stepped over his legs and stood within the protective circle of his arms sucking her thumb. Her sister joined her. The two stood pressed together; K closed his eyes; the baby continued to kick and whine. (90-91)

The grieving mother and the dead baby are substituted by a woman with three children. Now the family tableau of *Life &Times of Michael K* is as complete as it can be. A man protecting two children and a woman holding her baby, united in loving care for each other.

Robert publicly exclaims that they will be locked up to starve and die. Michael K broods over his words and wonders whether the guards could really be indifferent to their deaths, jumping on to the question of the bodies left behind and their disposal: "When people died they left bodies behind. Even people who died of starvation left bodies behind. Dead bodies could be as offensive as living bodies, if it was true that a living body could be offensive. If these people really wanted to be rid of us, he thought (curiously he watched the thought begin to unfold itself into his head, like a plant growing), […]" (94) The thought that grows on him picks up a motif from *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), when the magistrate imagines a big pit in which all 'barbarians' could be made to disappear (WFB 26), the notion of an *Endlösung*. Michael K senses Robert's influence on his thoughts:

> It seemed more like Robert than like him, as he knew himself, to think like that. Would he have to say that the thought was Robert's and had merely found a home in him, or could he say that though the seed had come from Robert, the thought, having grown up inside him, was now his own? He did not know. (95)

Michael K makes transparent how he has adopted Robert's perspective, or at least his way of thinking. Translated into terms of his political education he has reached a new level of

awareness, aided both by events in the camp and by the encounters with its inhabitants and its supervisors.

One night a fight breaks out and the guard with whom Michael K had had a few exchanges gets wounded. Michael K rushes to his aid, for the first time raising his voice in the camp: "We must take him to the gate!" (96) The tableau of life and death (and love) receives an addendum: Michael K supporting a bleeding man amidst the commotion and ensuring his rescue. This is the last picture from Jakkalsdrif, as in the same night Michael K climbs the fence and returns to the Visagie farm. Impressed on his mind is the education he received through the life and death in the camp of Jakkalsdrif, just as it has been impressed on the mind of the reader.

### Michael K and the Medical Officer – The Reader as Interrogator and Witness of Interrogation

In section TWO of *Life & Times of Michael K,* the setting shifts to a hospital ward, after Michael has been picked up by the police, brought to a prison and put into the care of a medical officer. The narrative focalization shifts to the first person perspective of a medical officer. The reader no longer accesses the mind of Michael K, but instead is offered an external perspective from the side of the ruling regime. As with the magistrate the medical officer's position will be affected by Michael K. In the beginning, his report concentrates on the medical aspects of the new patient. Later, his curiosity will reach beyond the body of Michael K.

When the medical officer describes his condition, the reader gets to hear the full extent of K's physical malnourishment. He weighs less than forty kilos and is described as "a little old man." (129) The medical officer assigns him the name Michaels.[95] His initial assessment ends in uncertainty: "I am not sure he is wholly of our world." (130) He acknowledges what has resulted from Michael K's effort to remove himself from what the officer calls "our world" – the world that has not been kind to him. Beginning with the cleft lip, which is now explained to the reader in medical terms as a "simple incomplete cleft, with some displacement of the septum." (130) When the medical officer offers to correct the lip, Michael K simply replies (and the officer here quotes him): "I am what I am." (130)

Michael K is passively resigned to his situation and rests on his bed with a smile, holding a brown paper bag with dried pumpkin seeds to his chest. The baby trope reappears at

[95] Just as Oludah Equiano, a former slave who at the end of the 18th century published his autobiography, is named Michael by one of his masters. Cf. Equiano 1995.

this point, but the medical officer's perspective now transcends the body of flesh into the metaphorical:

> He is like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of tine, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone. Through the intestines of war. An unbearing, unborn creature. I cannot really think of him as a man, though he is older than me by most reckonings. (135)

The medical officer is getting closer to Michael K, but the access gained through his external assessment cannot compete with the access the reader has through the previous and later third person narrative of Michael K. In this section we see Michael K through the eyes of the medical officer. As readers we are offered an inside first person perspective on the events, in particular on the protagonist; we cannot help but submit to the narrative authority and assumed reliability of the medical officer, who shares with us his doubts about the adequacy of their measures and about the regime's strategy. We share his perspective and view Michael K in a different light.

Following the passage quoted above, Michael K shows signs of irritation: "'Do you think if you leave me alone I am going to die?' he said. 'Why do you want to make me fat? Why fuss over me, why am I so important?'" (135) The officer's weak answer that "[n]o one is forgotten" (136) prompts Michael K to give an insightful and moving résumé of his mother's toils and undignified demise. The medical officer retreats to his position of supremacy.

After news of a sabotage act in Prince Albert, the medical officer and his colleague Noel again interrogate Michael K, who in the records runs as insurgent providing food to enemy troops. Michael K refuses to be implicated: "I am not in the war." (138) Asked about the soldiers taking his pumpkins, he shrugs: "What grows is for all of us. We are all children of the earth." (139) As in the case of Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, I am delighted by such naive simplicity of goodwill. The medical officer uses his advantage of having talked to K extensively by bringing up the burial of K's mother. Michael K reacts: "His face closed like a stone, and I pressed on, scenting the advantage." (139) Like on earlier occasions, the reader can pick up on the scheming and insincere tone of the narrative voice: "I paused; he stared stonily back."(140) The frustrated medical officer implores Michael K to talk: "Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed." (140) Michael K. remains unaffected by the officer's attitude towards him. The substance of Michael K remains with him, but the text performs a new access through which the reader can explore the character. The medical officer repeats his initial

assessment to Noel: "He is not of our world. He lives in a world of his own." (142) And: "No papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you are. The obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy." (142)

Surprisingly the medical officer's narrative continues. He discharges Michael only to have him back in the hospital ward two days later. Michael K refuses all food offered to him. As readers we can see how the medical officer begins to take Michael K's side, especially in his arguments with Noel, whom he tries to convince to let Michael K slip away; the medical officer argues: "Maybe you and I wouldn't like camp food either." And: "Maybe he is just a very thin man." (146) In an attempt to supply the right "kind of food" for Michael K, the medical officer brings him grilled pumpkin squash. Michael K takes a bite and nods when the officer asks him if he likes it. Returning later, the medical officer finds the plate empty, but assumes Michael to have disposed of the rest. Michael K still wonders why the medical officer is paying him so much attention: "I ask myself: What am I to this man? I ask myself: What is it to this man if I live or die?" To which the medical officer replies: "You might as well ask why we don't shoot prisoners. It is the same question." (148) Refusing to nurture life is to him the same as to take a life. Michael K's voiceless reply shakes the medical officer:

> He shook his head from side to side, then without warning opened the dark pools of his eyes on me. There was something more I had wanted to say, but I could not speak. It seemed foolish to argue with someone who looked at you as if from beyond the grave.
> For a long while we stared at each other. Then I found myself speaking, in no more than a whisper. As I spoke I thought: Surrender. This is how surrender will feel. (148)

This long exchange of looks seems to indicate a turning point in the medical officer's attitude towards Michael K. Yet it remains unsure how far his allegiance will go. This scene is followed by a letter the medical officer addresses to Michaels – even though by now he knows his real name to be Michael: "He says his name is not Michaels but Michael." (131) But the medical officer continues to refer to him as Michaels, perhaps to please the protocol of the camp. In the heading line of a personal letter it seems like a sign of mistrust; and this while the letter takes on the tone of a confession, or at least a statement explaining his motives: "The answer is: Because I want to know your story." The medical officer goes on to speculate about Michael K: "You are no soldier, Michaels, you are a figure of fun, a clown, a wooden man."[96] In the same vein:

> You are like a stick insect, Michaels, whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape. You are like a stick insect that has landed, God knows how, in the middle of a great wide flat bare concrete plain. You raise your slow fragile stick-legs one at a time, you inch about looking for something to merge with, and there is nothing. (149)

[96] Later, in *Summertime*, Adriana will apply the same phrase („Wooden Man") to Coetzee himself (ST 200).

The medical officer's assessment shows how he desires to subject Michael K to a system of classification. By choosing an insect as point of comparison, the gap is solidified by an emphasis of his being-apart. Accordingly, the idea of displaying Michael K in a museum (with label and plaque) objectifies him further, annulling even the frail attempts of the stick-insect to establish contact with the world. The letter ends with an appeal to Michael K to yield. (152) He signs the letter: "A friend." (152) Imposing his nomenclature on Michael K is a one-sided procedure and compared with Michael K's encounters with the man in the green and gold track suit and his friendship with Robert, this relationship is nowhere close to being a genuine approximation between two strangers. The reader is not informed whether the letter is ever delivered to Michael K, nor is there any reply. It seems more a self-serving monologue on the side of the medical officer, whose attempts to gain a better understanding of Michael K are misdirected and ultimately doomed to fail. Accordingly, Michael K escapes from the Kenilworth camp without leaving any trace behind: "He must have tiptoed out, climbed the wall – God knows how – and stolen away. The wire does not seem to have been cut; but then Michaels is enough of a wraith to slip through anything." (154) The medical officer hereby completes his mystification of Michael K, which serves to reinforce his otherness within the categories imposed by the camp and its regulations. By the end of his stay in this camp, Michael K weighed "[t]hirty-five kilos, all skin and bone." (156)

The medical officer has failed to make an impact on Michael K, has failed to take his perspective and develop any sincere empathy, instead remaining sympathetic with a touch of pity and amazement at his obduracy. However, the impact of Michael K on the medical officer can be traced throughout his report. After Michael K's escape he again begins to question the sense of their mission, which will now change from rehabilitation to mere internment. In a very Coetzeean moment he ponders the option of abandoning his work, if just for one day:

> Maybe the universal sum of happiness would be increased if we declared this afternoon a holiday and went down to the beach, commandant, doctor, chaplain, PT instructors, guards, dog-handlers all together with the six hard cases from the detention block, leaving behind the concussion case to look after things. (157)

This is contrasted by Noel's assessment: "We are fighting this war [...] so that minorities will have a say in their destinies." (157) The minority in this case being the ruling (white) class. This passage ends with a derogative remark from the medical officer, who still remains attached to the paradigms connected to Noel's statement: "Michaels with his fantasy of making the desert bloom with pumpkin flowers is another of those too busy, too stupid, too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history." (159) Though Michael K is no longer present, the report continues to relate to us the delivery of four hundred new prisoners. Again, the medical

officer considers abandoning his post and following Michael K's example of "walking a little closer to the earth." (160) Michael K's presence is now shifted to the text and the resonance of the encounter with the medical officer, which has affected the latter far more than the former. Adding to previous assessments, the medical officer offers a new idea:

> With Michaels it always seemed to me that someone had scuffed together a handful of dust, spat on it, and patted it into the shape of a rudimentary man, making one or two mistakes (the mouth, and without a doubt the contents of the head), omitting one or two details (the sex), but coming up nevertheless in the end with a genuine little man of earth, the kind of little man one sees in peasant art emerging into the world from between the squat thighs of its mother-host with fingers ready hooked and back ready bent for a life of burrowing, a creature that spends its waking life stooped over the soil, that when at last its time comes digs its own grave and slips quietly in and draws the heavy earth over its head like a blanket and cracks a last smile and turns over and descends into sleep, home at last, while unnoticed as ever somewhere far away the grinding of the wheels of history continues. (161)

The medical officer imagines the life and death of Michael K. He does not attempt to take Michael K's perspective, but applies his own perspective metaphorically. This reinforces his earlier thought that Michael K was "not of this world," while simultaneously feigning Michael's birth from the earth (like the first man Adam), and his return to dust. As readers we have seen Michael K discover (or recover?) and acknowledge his affiliation to the earth that sustains him, the medical officer's speculative imagination express this connection with different words. Even though the medical officer expresses it metaphorically, the "rudimentary man" is not without substance, but instead a "genuine little man of earth," embodied through birth, burrowing, and finally the return to his earthly grave.

This act of the medical officer's imagination is a runner-up for the next more sympathetic scenario. Using first-person narration he imagines having followed Michael K, having dogged "him". He imagines Michael K wondering: "Who is this behind me? What does he want?" (162) Using direct speech at this point prepares the reader for the shift of narrative perspective. "And here, in the light of day, you would have at last turned and looked at me." (162) For the first time since writing the letter, the report of the medical officer addresses Michael K and speaks of him in the second person. This represents a significant shift of perspective and mode of narration. Now the Medical officer's hypothetical narration slips into the perspective of Michael K, tries to grasp what Michael K might see in him, and provides a catalogue of K's abuse through himself:

> [T]he pharmacist turned makeshift medical officer turned foot-follower who before seeing the light had dictated to you when you might sleep and when you might wake, who had pushed tubes up your nose and pills down your throat, who had stood in your hearing and made jokes about you, who above all had unrelentingly pressed food on you that you could not eat. Suspiciously, angrily even, you would have waited in the middle of the track for me to approach and explain myself. (162)

The reader has been steered into an imaginary encounter between the medical officer (I) and Michael K (you). The reader might now inhabit the position of Michael K, taking the place of the "you" being addressed by the text (though he is safely removed from emotional contagion through the use of past tense for this scenario). Resorting to epic-biblical tone, the scene continues: "And I would have come before you and spoken." (162) In the following sequence the officer asks for forgiveness, pleads to be allowed to follow Michael K like a disciple, asking to be taught how to stay out of the camps: "[T]herefore I have chosen you to show me the way." (163) This lengthy appeal (presented as direct speech) is intensified by increased proximity of the protagonists: "Then I would have stepped closer till I was within touching distance and you could not fail to see into my eyes." (163) Continuing his appeal, he comments on the "originality of the resistance" Michael K offered, and explains to what insight it has led him: "Then as I watched you day after day I slowly began to understand the truth: that you were crying secretly, unknown to your conscious self (forgive the term), for a different kind of food, food that no camp can supply. [...] Now I had been taught that the body contains no ambivalence. The body, I had been taught, wants only to live." (164) Again the appeal is interrupted, and Coetzee – through his third-person narrator – inserts a reminder of the setting (on the outskirts of the Flats, an area of Cape Town), providing some atmospheric noise, together with a reminder of the eye contact established between the two: "[M]y glittering eye would have held you, for the time being, rooted where you stood." (164) The reader experiences an act of shared attention, in which he remains in the position of 'neutral' observer; this scenario supplies excellent conditions for *narrative empathy* to develop in the reader. The medical officer goes on to describe the impact Michael K has had on him, creating yet another scenario in which he stands in the door to K's room and watches him sleeping, sensing "a thickening of the air, a concentration of darkness, a black whirlwind roaring in utter silence above your body, pointing to you [...]" (164), sensing a "gathering of meaningfulness," (165) while at the same time questioning the sincerity of his perspective, which now directs the reader's attention back to himself: "And standing in the doorway I would turn my bleakest stare in upon myself, seeking by the last means I knew to detect the germ of dishonesty at the heart of the conviction."[97] Meaning the conviction that Kenilworth is "a privileged site where meaning erupted into the world." (165) The thickening air and the increased meaningfulness are clearly produced by the officer's narrative, and he himself

[97] Though this novel predates the publication of Coetzee's seminal essay „Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (1985), the fundamental suspicion against all modes of confession already finds its expression in the presentation of the medical officer's report. See also section 5.1.7.

comments on the fallibility of his perceptions. On the level of reading the mode of shared attention, directed by the medical officer's narrative, could be said to correspond with the increasing of meaning, as the shared perspectives of author (Coetzee), character (medical officer/Michael K), and reader converge and ultimately produce new lines of interpretation induced by the use of their sympathetic imagination. The medical officer turns his gaze outwards again and imagines how he has lost Michael K's attention. He imagines hurrying after him to finish what he has to say, even running after him and calling after him: "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it." (166)

The allegory the medical officer speaks of applies mainly to his encounter with Michael K. The meaning Michael K has taken on within this report has been ascribed to him by the medical officer. And it has affected him by activating and redirecting his sympathetic imagination, through which he has been able to develop empathy for Michael K beyond the initial attitude of pity. In fact, his perspective-taking is as far-reaching as it can be, for in the end of this hypothetical scenario the medical officer continues running after Michael K, who he calls an "escape artist." (166) In a last effort of grasping the "meaning" of Michael K, he speaks of K's garden:

> Let me tell you the meaning of the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life. The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. It is another name for the only place where you belong, Michaels, where you do not feel homeless. It is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road, and only you know the way. (166)

By ascertaining that Michel K does not belong in any camp, the medical officer is in a way acknowledging Michael K's autonomy. The medical officer continues to run after K in his imaginary scenario, imploring him to reply to his elaborate appeal. But the scenario (and the report of the officer) ends without any reply from Michael K.

The report of the medical officer sets an example of a shift in perspective, both in narrative terms and in terms of character. The first person narration invites us to take the perspective of the officer. Then, by shifting to an imaginary scenario in the last part of this section, Michael K is transposed into a second person position, which invites the reader to feel addressed more or less directly by the text. Thereby, the reader has access to both character positions, to both subject (I) and object (you), while at the same time remaining an external observer of events. Focalized through the medical officer, the narrative instructs us how to

arrive at a position of empathy towards Michael K, illustrating the process through the officer's report.

### 2.5.6 Cheer up, Michael K

The encounters I have discussed previously have shown another side of Michael K, a more active and outreaching side. And there are numerous instances in which we see Michael K actively communicating with others, as when his mother, Anna K, is released from the hospital and he asks for a wheelchair (which he doesn't get). (5) At the railway station he pleaded with the clerk for an earlier departure. (9) He explains to the warden of his flat that he and his mother will be leaving. (16) At the hospital in Stellenbosch he volunteers to work, but the "man in a white coat" sends him to an office he doesn't find. (29) Later, at Jakkalsdrif, he sits next to a boy with a bandaged stump of an arm. "'What happened?' said K. The boy turned away and did not reply." (72) In this case it is the other who refuses communication, just like the woman at the police counter and later the shop owner in Prince Albert.

One encounter in particular stands out in its normality. It is a short encounter with a man in the hospital at Stellenbosch. The casualty and genuine goodwill displayed in this scene, including anecdotes and personal information revealed to K by the man, deserves to be quoted fully:

> A man in the hospital yard fell into conversation with him. 'You here for stitches?' he enquired. K shook his head. Then he told a long story of a tractor that had toppled over him, crushing his leg and breaking his hip, and of the pins the doctors had inserted in his bones, silver pins that would never trust. He walked with a curiously angled aluminum stick. 'You don't know where I could get something to eat,' asked K. 'I haven't eaten since yesterday.' 'Man,' said the man, 'why don't you go and get us both a pie,' and passed K a one-rand coin. K went to the bakery and brought back two hot chicken pies. He sat beside his friend on the bench and ate. The pie was so delicious that tears came to his eyes. The man told him of his sister's uncontrollable fits of shaking. K listened to the birds in the trees and tried to remember when he had known such happiness. (29-30)

As usual, Coetzeean moments of bliss and/or serenity are accompanied by birdsong, a small but intriguing detail which frequently reappears in Coetzee's fictions. The normality of the exchange touches K's heart; a simple gesture of sharing food together is sometimes all it takes.

In all of these encounters Michael K shows initiative and articulacy, which stands in opposition to the social isolation of Michael K emphasized by the text. Michael K is not a trauma victim that calls for pity, which in no case is a helpful response anyway. The Michael K created by Coetzee teaches us a lesson about our perception of others, and the text implicitly promotes a potential shift of perspective towards a more empathetic emotional

response to others. If the readers allow the virtual encounter with Michael K to affect them, as well as Michael K's encounters with others, then their empathetic capacities have been exercised and enhanced, and any Michael K they ever meet will benefit from their reading experience, as might others. And then we might be able to agree with a man from the railroad labour gang addressing K: "'Cheer up!' said the man, giving K a smile, punching him lightly on the shoulder. 'Soon you'll be your own man again!'" (43)

## 3. Silence and Scripture in *Foe*, *Age of Iron*, and *The Master of Petersburg*

While Coetzee's first four novels strongly focus on the inner life of the main protagonists, with the social context as a backdrop to their development or lack thereof, the following three novels mark a shift of attention towards a stronger emulation and foregrounding of social context. *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K* already showed first signs of this shift of attention: the Magistrate reveals his inner struggles to the reader, but his environment (frontier and empire) and its impact on him play a crucial role for his moral growth; Michael K's position of non-power and his attempted withdrawal from the political stage reflect the social structures of South Africa. In contrast, Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee, and Magda are far more solitary figures. Clearly, it makes little sense to propose clear "phases" in Coetzee's oeuvre, as has been done repeatedly with artists of all kinds, fairly prominently with Pablo Picasso and the colour-coded phases attributed to his works. On the other hand, in terms of my overall approach, it is fair to assume shifts of emphasis and to mark certain developments in Coetzee's writing. However, by emphasizing the development of the sympathetic imagination in Coetzee's fiction, I am not inferring a teleological reading of his work.

A closer look at the characters in the following three novels and the main protagonists' encounter with others will reveal how much the quality of reflection on others and on their social context has changed. Susan Barton (*Foe*) reveals more about her thoughts on Cruso, Friday, and Foe than about herself. On a literary level, *Foe* is a reflection on narrative authority and truthfulness in combination with a postcolonial re-writing of a founding text of European literary modernity. The (self-)characterisation of Elizabeth Curren (*Age of Iron*) once again is closer to a psychogram, but the emphasis lies on her reflections on her social environment, which she learns to appraise during the course of the novel – as a consequence she reflects on her responsibility towards others. All this is presented as a letter to her

daughter, creating a proxy writer who controls the narrative. Lastly, the Dostoevsky figure in *The Master of Petersburg* offers reflections on writing at a more personal level, but also in relation to a society at a time of approaching transformation. *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg* feature a far more personal tone than the novels before, which were artfully kept at a distance from Coetzee's own life. His writing now seems influenced by his family background, more specifically the death of Coetzee's mother Vera and of his son Nicolas. My reading suggests that the more personal (at least more obviously so) investment of Coetzee raises the stakes of his writing, in particular in regard to the sympathetic imagination.

In the analysis of the early novels I largely concentrated on distinct categories of a rather physiological nature[98] related to a (un-)sympathetic engagement on the side of the protagonists (the eyes and heart), in a second step inferring an empathetic reaction on the side of the reader in his perception of the characters. *Life & times of Michael K* marked a transition to a more situational analysis on the text level. This will also be the focus of the following analysis.

Taking up the approach of Fritz Breithaupt (*Kulturen der Empathie*; see 1.5) and applying his concept of 'narrative empathy', I will focus on the character constellations and their interactions with others. In the case of Susan Barton in *Foe*, the primary focus lies on her attitude towards and dealings with Friday, but also her relations to Cruso and Foe will be considered. In *Age of Iron*, Elizabeth Curren's encounter with Vercueil will be in the centre of attention, with the boys Beki and John as additional reference points. In *The Master of Petersburg* Dostoevsky's search for the fate of his deceased son Pavel will constitute the point of departure of my reading, followed by a look at his relationship with his landlady and her daughter, but also his encounter with the revolutionary Nechaev.

## 3.1 *Foe* (1986) – The Barton Archipelago

If Michael K was attempting to lead an insular and secluded life (I am an island), Susan Barton can be said to look for connections between groupings of islands (I am an archipelago): "The World is full of islands, said Cruso once. His words ring truer every day." (FOE 71)[99] Later Foe comments: "The island is not a story in itself." (117) In light of the

[98] In accordance with my overall approach these categories were meant to serve as emphasis on the body; in contrast to more textual approaches which are the more obvious choice in assessing Coetzee's very literary narrative constructions. Especially *In the Heart of the Country* foregrounds textual aspects rather than aspects of plot and character; but an alternative reading is possible and offers insightful angles of interpretation.

[99] Coetzee 1987 [1986]. All quotes in section 3.1 will be from FOE unless indicated otherwise.

metaphor employed above, no single character can form a story without any kind of social context.

As usual, Coetzee avoids an easy categorization of his novel in terms of genre. First of all, it is the rewriting of a classic, as others have done before him (Michel Tournier, Muriel Spark, Adrien Mitchells; cf. Horstmann 2005: 105). The first section resembles a travel report, in which she relates to the reader the story of her encounter with Cruso and Friday on the island. It begins with Susan Barton being washed ashore on a solitary island where she encounters Friday and Cruso (in this order) and continues with her rescue and subsequent stay in London with Friday (while Cruso dies on the ocean passage). This reminds us of the death of countless slaves on their passage, and in analogy to the rape of Lucy in *Disgrace* it might possibly be a suggestion of some form of retributive justice of history.

All paragraphs of the first two sections are opened by single quotation marks, a closing quotation mark to be found only at the end of the sections; the sections are thereby qualified as open-ended speech acts. At first the addressee is the reader (by default), only in the second section the dated letters mark out Foe as her addressee.[100] In section III and IV the quotation marks are omitted, indicating that we have moved on from reporting to story-telling.[101] All the first three sections are narrated in first person past tense. Only in the final section a heterodiegetic perspective supplants her homodiegetic account, without any apparent focalizer.

The foregrounded textuality of the narrative shifts the arena of the sympathetic imagination to the textual level. As readers we are not challenged to engage with Susan Barton (or Friday), our sympathetic imagination becomes activated in the final section only. Before then, we witness Susan Barton's attempt to reach out to Friday by employing her sympathetic imagination. For our understanding, it is important to discuss her position of relative narrative authority. Coetzee manages to overlap in Susan Barton the writer's as well as the reader's perspective. In the first section, she is presented as a writer trying to make sense of events and characters. In her encounter with Friday she becomes a reader, using her sympathetic imagination to close the gap between Friday and herself (never quite successful). In her encounter with Foe she is both writer and reader, but the discourse shifts towards the ethics of writing and the negotiation of narrative authority; here the sympathetic imagination is of little relevance. The discussions with Foe reflect on her relationship with Friday, and

[100] Although later in her conversation with Foe she says of them: "[…] letters that were never read by you, and were later not sent, and at last not even written down, I continued to trust in my own authorship." (FOE 133)
[101] For more details regarding the formal structure see Tiffin 1994: 27-28.

questions of narrative entitlement keep surfacing. The challenge for Susan Barton remains in attuning her sympathetic imagination to Friday; and in the end she does reach a state of empathetic engagement, though in a very limited way.

### 3.1.1 Enter Susan Barton

Susan Barton arrives on the island "carried by the waves," (5) but unlike Botticelli's Venus she is dressed in a petticoat. In the course of her narration the reader receives details of her background story, though the reliability of this account is questionable, which Susan Barton explicitly infers. Her father is French and originally carried the name Berton, which was then "corrupted in the mouth of strangers." (11) Susan's only daughter was abducted to the New World; where Susan searches for her in Bahia without any success. On her trip back home to Lisbon a mutiny takes place, and she ends up being set afloat in a little boat, which she ultimately quits ("I slipped overboard"), and then "[t]he waves took [her] and bore [her] on to the beach." (11) Later in the novel she characterizes herself curtly: "I am the woman washed ashore." (99)

Susan Barton gives us some details that could be seen to amount to a description of her features, in its disparity and brevity far from the minute details provided by Daniel Defoe in his original narrative of Robinson Crusoe. She is "a tall woman with black hair and dark eyes." (81) Towards the end of the novel, reporting to Foe on her trip with Friday to the ports of Bristol, she summarizes the demise of her appearance: "My clothes are in tatters, my hair is lank. I look like an old woman, a filthy old gypsy-woman." (125) This is as far as her account of her outward appearance goes, the paper embodiment of Susan Barton.

### 3.1.2 Susan Barton's Narrative

Susan Barton presents the story to the reader, and Coetzee's rewriting of Defoe's canonical text insinuates that Defoe appropriated Susan Barton's story.[102] At first glance this appears to be an act of female empowerment in the face of a story originally quite void of any female figures.[103] Ultimately she loses her struggle to maintain control over her narrative, since the historical (De)Foe will omit her from the story and embellish her account to accommodate the thrills of adventure and exotism which the public seems to hunger for, the considerations of the book market outweighing all of Susan's pleas for factuality and

[102] Attridge discusses *Foe* as a comment on literary canonicity (Attridge 1992).
[103] See Atwell 1991: 106-110.

truthfulness.[104] Susan Barton rebels against Foe's utilization and appropriation of her life in terms of his fictional production:

> I am not a story, Mr Foe. I may impress you as a story because I began my account of myself without preamble, slipping overboard into the water and striking out for the shore. But my life did not begin in the waves. There was a life before the water which stretched back to my desolate searchings in Brazil, thence to the years when my daughter was still with me, and so on back to the day I was born. All of which makes up a story I do not choose to tell. I choose not to tell it because to no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world. I choose rather to tell of the island, of myself and Cruso and Friday and what we three did there: for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire. (131)

The substantiality Susan claims for herself here is questioned earlier in the narrative, when she speaks of herself as a "paper being" or asks: "Who is speaking me?" (117) Dominic Head comments this acutely: "The self-conscious ontological uncertainty of the character, familiar in postmodernist writing, is given a metafictional richness." (Head 1997: 117)[105] Derek Attridge comments: "We are both invited to give this first-person text, with its deictics and its direct address, the emotional and axiological investment of an autobiographical account and at the same time are kept at a distance, made to feel that the very status and function of autobiography are being put in question." (Attridge 1998: 206) The letters in section II follow a similar logic, even though they are addressed directly to Foe: "To whom am I writing? I blot the pages and toss them out of the window. Let who will read them." (64) In a different vein, Ulrich Horstmann sees Barton as a projective proxy of Coetzee, whereby he reflects on his artistic self-understanding and self-assessment (Horstmann 2005: 109). Although this follows the all too simple identification of author and character, I consider it as some indicator of Coetzee's investment in his fiction. The figure of Foe also prompts self-reflection on the work of an author and his dealings with source material. Coetzee himself can be quoted with his comment on Bakhtin:

> By no means all historical situations permit the ultimate semantic authority of the creator to be expressed without mediation in direct, unrefracted, unconditional authorial discourse. When there is no access to one's own personal "ultimate" word, then every thought, feeling, experience must be refracted through the medium of someone else's discourse, someone else's style, someone else's manner. (Coetzee 1996: 223)

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[104] Dominic Head discusses this as a "repression of male experience" and remarks: "Following the premise that Susan Barton's story of the island is the Ur-text of Crusoe, we must conclude that she is effaced from this text of Defoe's, and placed in another (Roxana)." (Head 1997: 115)

[105] Susan Barton repeatedly comments her own narrative in brackets and directly addresses the reader: "(of whom I will say more later)" (7); "(I shall have more to say of the terraces later)" (15); "My palms were soon blistered –*see!* – but I dared not rest […] (11; emphasis added); "(I have not yet told you of Cruso's stove, which was built very neatly of stone)" (14); "For readers reared on travellers' tales, the words *desert isle* may conjure up a place [...]" (7)

This pins down what Susan Barton somewhat naively was hoping to achieve with her narrative, asking Foe only to brush up on the language – of course a thorough reader of Coetzee will doubt the attainability of "one's own personal 'ultimate' word."

### Narrative Cannibalism or Salvation? Kisses and Embraces

Barton characterizes Foe as "the author who had heard many confessions" (48), but soon she has to learn that his confidentiality is not to be trusted. In *Stranger Shores* Coetzee writes about Defoe's original: "It [Robinson Crusoe] is fake autobiography heavily influenced by the genres of deathbed confession and the spiritual autobiography." (*Stranger Shores* 22) Rosemary Jolly picks up on this:

> The metaphor of salvation resonates throughout the tale of Susan Barton's endeavors. This metaphor describes what Susan Barton believes narrative can do for her and her ghostly companions, "shipwrecked" by Coetzee in a narrative that imposes the problem of its own dis-closure on its own fictional narrator. Susan Barton has the desire of any castaway to be saved. However, in Coetzee's novel this desire is given metafictional expression in the linking of Susan Barton's desire to be saved literally –that is, from the island –to her desire to be saved literally, in and by her own narrative. [...] The rejection of salvation through narrative, signalled by the refusal or rejection of the figures of Friday and Cruso to be translated into narrative, suggests a violation demonstrated in and inflicted by Susan Barton's narrative throughout the fiction. This violation has its basis in the inability of narrative, especially a narrative that attempts to de-scribe characters as figures of "the truth," to deal with bodies as bodies, rather than as figures of speech. (Jolly 1996: 7-8)

In its narrative presentation Coetzee goes through similar notions as Defoe did in the original story. Birk and Neumann comment on the structuring of narrative perspective in *Robinson Crusoe*: The homodiegetic narrator represents the sole normative centre of meaning and orientation. In accordance with this unitary projection, polarizing differences are constructed between Crusoe's European identity and the ethnic alterity of Friday and the indigenous tribes. This abets the idea of an imperial superiority and represents it as the only binding order of reality (Birk/Neumann 2002: 134).

Susan Barton's struggle with the intended author of her story reflects the power play between character and author; something Coetzee might mean quite literal, as he professes to belong to the school of writers whose characters speak to them and develop their own life within the confines of a narrative (or at least of the paper it is written on). Again, Susan struggles to maintain control over her narrative against Foe's suggestions of altering it by

introducing elements such as cannibalism to increase sales.[106] Rosemary Jolly applies the metaphor of cannibalism more extensively to the text:

> The metaphor used to convey this violation of the body by narrative in *Foe* is that of cannibalism. The only cannibals in *Foe* are its narrator-characters, and the only cannibalism is that which they inflict upon their subjects in the process of turning them into stories. Foe, in the process of trying to turn Susan Barton into a story, is depicted actually biting her, then sucking the wound and murmuring, "This is my manner of preying on the living." (139) (Jolly 1996: 7-8)[107]

Susan Barton, however, insists on her narrative authority and ownership: "It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold. By such means do I still endeavour to be *father* to my story." (123; emphasis added) Coetzee here highlights the traditionally male image of the artist 'giving birth' to art. In her negotiations with Foe, Susan Barton again and again becomes susceptible to self-doubt – at this point it might be helpful to point out that Coetzee's depiction of female narrators tends to cast them rather traditionally without reducing their complexity.[108] Once Susan Barton finally encounters Foe face to face, she senses her insecure ontological status as a fictional character, even proposing the absence of any addressee (in section II her letters were explicitly addressing Foe):

> Why do I speak, to whom do I speak, when there is no need to speak?
> In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. I thought I was myself and this girl a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her. But now I am full of doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking to me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you? (133)

At this moment Foe kisses her, as if to prove her substantiality, and she returns the kiss; similarly Susan had embraced and kissed the girl, supposedly her child, just shortly before. These gestures are somewhat mechanical – as are both the intercourses with Cruso and later with Foe; almost as if Coetzee wanted to demonstrate how physical interaction (in the spirit of embodiedness) can run empty without an accompanying motion of the heart, i.e. the sympathetic imagination. A telling remark of Susan shows her emphasis on word exchanges as superior to physical contact: "Who would venture to say that what passes between lovers is of substance (*I refer to their lovemaking, not their talk*), yet is it not true that something is passed between them, back and forth, and they come away refreshed and healed for a while of their loneliness?" (97; original italcs) Immediately after their coupling Cruso dies aboard the

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[106] To which she candidly replies: "All I say is: What I saw, I wrote. I saw no cannibals; and if they come after nightfall and fled before the dawn, they left no footprint behind." (54) Which of course ironically alludes to the emblematic scene of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe discovering footprints on the beach.

[107] Josephine Dodd takes this one step further and sees literary cannibalism at work in Coetzee's appropriation of intertexts: "There are plenty of stories of daughters in search of their mothers: *A Room of One's Own* is one, and one which Coetzee seems happy enough to vampirise in *Foe*. Adrienne Rich's poem 'Diving into the Wreck' is another." (Dodd 1998: 161)

[108] Cf. Kossew 1998: 166-179.

ship carrying them towards the English metropolis; note the cannibalistic undertones of her appropriation of Cruso, of whom she claims to have inherited the story of the island: "Do you think of me, Mr Foe, as Mrs Cruso or as a bold adventuress? Think what you may, it was I who shared Cruso's bed and closed Cruso's eyes, as it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island." (52)

Of Foe she expects narrative salvation: "Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty." (51) These exchanges are not forms of empathetic engagement, but hollow attempts at feigning intimacy. As a reader we experience no warmth or gentleness in these proceedings, but observe a strategic interplay framed by issues of authorship and narrative authority. Susan's comment points in a similar direction: "Thus I conclude you are aware that ghosts can converse with us, and embrace and kiss us too." (134) Not the "full electric being" (EC 111) is enacted here, and Coetzee leaves little doubt about it. However, one can sense a yearning in Susan Barton. Susan craves for a kiss, for an embrace: an answering kiss: "Why do you think we do not kiss statues […]?" (79) But Cruso and Foe have little to give her; her reflections on being a saviour for Cruso and a muse for Foe are not shared by the men she preys upon (Foe could be said to prey on her as well, as the above scene shows; whereas Cruso is impartial to her advances. Cruso in particular is characterized as an anti-Robinson, void of any ambition to make the island inhabitable or any desire to be saved. Susan Barton stubbornly presupposes a mutual exchange of sympathies with Cruso and Foe, while doubting Friday's capacities in this respect: "But Friday stood like a statue. [remember Susan asking: Do we kiss statues?] I have no doubt that amongst Africans the human sympathies move as readily as amongst us. But the unnatural years Friday had spent with Cruso had deadened his heart, making him cold, incurious, like an animal wrapt entirely in itself.' (70) Her remark applies more to Cruso than to Friday, of whom she knows close to nothing.

### Mutual Embrace of Paper Ghosts

In analogy to her craving for a mutual embrace, Susan Barton also craves for answers from Friday, whose muteness (he literally has no tongue) complicates the matter considerably and gives his paper being a ghostly quality.[109] Susan senses the similarity of her desire for

[109] See Kossew 1998: 172 and Marais 1996: 69. Also Jolly 1996: 144; and Dominic Head's chapter "Maze of Doubting," (Head 2009: 112-128) which engages with Helen Tiffin's 1987 essay "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse."

mutual embraces and for answers from Friday: "I say that the desire for answering speech is like the desire for the embrace of, the embrace by, another being." (80)

The trope of ghosts – which she also applies to her supposed daughter,[110] points towards her doubts about her ontological status; even suspecting a force controlling her from the background of her narrative. One of her metafictional comments points – with obvious irony – to the voice that authors her, namely the author Coetzee:

> Do we of necessity become puppets in a story whose end is invisible to us, and towards which we are marched like condemned felons? You and I know, in our different ways, how rambling an occupation writing is; and conjuring is surely much the same. We sit staring out the window, and a cloud shaped like a camel passes by, and before we know it our fantasy has whisked us away to the sands of Africa and our hero (who is no one but ourselves in disguise) is clashing scimitars with a Moorish brigand. A new cloud floats past in the form of a sailing-ship, and in a trice we are cast ashore all woebegone on a desert isle. Have we cause to believe that the lives it is given us to live proceed with any more design than these whimsical adventures?' (135)

The logic of authorial identification with a character (author in disguise), both engaged with an emerging narrative, is almost a parody on Coetzee's side, since his intricate narrative webs lay bare the mechanics of narrative construction without disrupting the narrative. Susan makes further observations on the profession of writing, which ring true and correspond to other passages in Coetzee's oeuvre – both in his fiction and in his criticism: "Letters are the mirror of words. Even when we seem to write in silence, our writing is the manifest of a speech spoken within ourselves or to ourselves." (142)[111] Foe drives home the point of Susan Barton's ontological uncertainty: "But have you considered that your doubts may be part of the story you live, of no greater weight than any other adventure of yours?" (135) This could be taken further and applied in a more general sense to most of Coetzee's fictional characters, where doubt plays a central role, both for the character and for the reader. And often enough the characters themselves voice their own doubts. For Susan it culminates in her statement quoted above (I am doubt itself) that echoes the position of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*. Doubt also explains Coetzee's reluctance to give in too easily to ready-made assumptions. Foe says at one point, after Susan tells him a story about the endless confessions of a woman: "To me the moral of the story is that there comes a time when we must give reckoning of ourselves to the world, and then forever after be content to hold our peace." (124) Susan comes to a quite different conclusion: "To me the moral is that he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force." (124) In this case, Foe and his story about

[110] Another context transplanted from *Roxana*, where the servant Amy presents the lost daughter to Roxana, who refuses to acknowledge her. See Atwell 1991: 110 for more detail.

[111] This points to the dialogism of Bakhtin, to the awakened countervoices within narrative discourse, on which Carrol Clarkson has commented in terms of grammatical choices in her Coetzee monograph *Countervoices*.

Robinson Crusoe prove more powerful than Susan's narrative – it remains to be seen how Coetzee's contestation of Defoe's narrative fares over time.

In an exchange shortly after, Susan attempts again to assert her substantiality, and Foe tries to reassure her by reminding her of her perceptions of the girl, the embrace and kiss given and received, to which Susan replies: "No, she is substantial, as my daughter is substantial and I am substantial; and you too are substantial, no less and no more than any of us. We are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world." (152) To which Foe curtly replies: "You have omitted Friday." (ibid.) This small comment points to the centre of her engagement with Friday, who throughout the first three sections remains insubstantial in regard to his inner life, no matter how hard Susan tries to establish some kind of rapport with him. Accordingly, she announces herself at the beginning of section III on their first visit to Foe: "'It is I, Susan Barton,' I announced – 'I am alone, with Friday.'" (113) Friday is an insubstantial shadow to her, and she Claims to remain alone in spite of his company.

### 3.1.3 Susan Barton and Friday

Susan Barton's substance pertains primarily to her inner life, to her beliefs and intentions. Friday's substance remains primarily physical, resting with his embodiedness; of his inner life close to nothing is revealed, neither to Susan Barton nor to the reader. In both cases it will be difficult for the reader to apply his sympathetic imagination and develop empathy for either character. Being confronted with Barton's beliefs and intentions without a proper embodiment leaves the reader with little to infer through empathetic engagement. Being presented Friday's physical embodiedness might offer a starting point, but Susan Barton's overpowering focalization prevents the reader from adopting Friday's perspective, stalling our sympathetic imagination and our empathetic engagement.

#### First Encounter

After Susan is washed ashore in the opening paragraph of section I, Friday makes his first appearance: "A dark shadow fell upon me, not of a cloud but of a man with a dazzling halo about him." (5) The allusion to the angel-like appearance – which conforms with Friday's insubstantiality in the course of the narrative (Thomas of Aquinas once postulated that countless angels would find place on the tip of a needle) – is immediately followed by a more qualified description from Susan: "He was black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers. I lifted myself and studied the flat face, the small dull

eyes, the broad nose, the thick lips, the skin not black but a dark grey, dry as if coated with dust." (5-6) This description is heavily slurred with racial denotations. Her first thought when he reaches for her arm is the fear of having encountered a cannibal: "He reached out and with the back of his hand touched my arm. He is trying my flesh, I thought. But by and by my breathing slowed and I grew calmer." (6) Comparing this with the physical contact she later has with Cruso and Foe, one cannot fail to notice the tenderness of Friday's gesture, which ameliorates even the worst suspicion. As Susan's foot catches a thorn and renders her immobile, Friday offers to carry her, to which she hesitatingly submits herself: "So part-way skipping on one leg, part-way riding on his back, with my petticoat gathered up and my chin brushing his springy hair, I ascended the hillside, my fear of him abating in this strange backward embrace." (6) This backward embrace constitutes the point of closest contact between Susan and Friday, while in the course of the narrative the distance continuously increases in spite of all her attempts to connect with Friday on a level of meanings. He is an angel for her, but the annunciation is limited to her very first impression.[112] Susan Barton's imagination originally draws on her fear and prejudice, but the physical proximity forced on her by circumstances of helplessness immediately override her initial assumptions, rendering her more sympathetic to Friday.

The prominent physical character of their first encounter points to the physical substantiality of Friday (in contrast to his inner insubstantiality), which even exceeds that of Foe and Susan, who give the impression of "paper beings" caught in their intimations of power and desire. In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee addresses this in a very straightforward manner:

> Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body. If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not "that which is not," and the proof that it *is* the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (One can get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can't in philosophy, I'm sure.)
> Not grace, then, but at least the body. (DP 248; original italics)

This notion corresponds with what Coetzee in *The Lives of Animals* characterizes as embodiment. However, embodiment alone does not lead to empathy; here the focalization through Barton stalls empathy.

[112] In the discussion of *Age of Iron* I will discuss how Vercueil plays a very similar role for Elizabeth Curren.

**Educating Friday: Signs and Symbolic Gestures of an Embodied Other**

Susan Barton's hermeneutical enterprise in regard to Friday compares well to that of the medical doctor (in *Life & Times of Michael K*) – whom Atwell labels as "hermeneutic parasite." (Atwell 1991: 97) Barton is primarily concerned with meanings; but a look at her dealings with others shows that she also assumes physical control over them. Her lovemaking with Foe reveals this clearly, but her tendency to take control over others can be traced back to her escape from the island. She forces both Cruso and Friday to leave the island against their will, ordering the rescue crew of the ship to capture Friday, who went into hiding:

> Nothing you can say will persuade him to yield himself up, for he has no understanding of words or power of speech. It will cost great effort to take him. Nevertheless, I beseech you to send your men ashore again; inasmuch as Friday is a slave and a child, it is our duty to care for him in all things, and not abandon him to a solitude worse than death. (39)

Obviously she is projecting her own emotional state on him, assuming a stance of care similar to that of the Magistrate towards the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Unknowingly, Susan Barton assumes control over the bodies she encounters far more successfully than her attempts at understanding – here a hermeneutics of the body are at work, recalling the body as the single standard erected. Cruso doesn't survive the displacement, and Friday certainly does not prosper and would most likely have been better off on the island by himself than in the hands of Susan Barton, who cannot help but record his demise in the metropolis: "Friday grows old before his time, like a dog locked up all its life." (55) She conjures the imagery of the 'noble savage' but does not conclude that she might have been wrong in extracting him from his prior habitat:

> From eating too much and lying abed he is growing stupid. Seeing him with his belly tight as a drum and his thin shanks and listless air, you would not believe he was the same man who brief months ago stood poised on the rocks, the seaspray dancing about him, the sunlight glancing on his limbs, his spear raised, ready in an instant to strike a fish. (57)

Just as absurdly as she attempts to tame a lizard on the island (7), Susan wishes to educate and domesticate Friday; but her general failure gives her intimations of the inadequacy of her approach:

> I tell myself I talk to Friday to educate him out of darkness and silence. But is that the truth? There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I understand why Cruso preferred not to disturb his muteness. (60)

But Susan Barton persists in her project of educating Friday, clearly failing to develop a more empathetic understanding of Friday.

In the second section Susan Barton and Friday have arrived in London. Susan approaches Foe to turn her account into a proper story without corrupting it; and the two of

them take up residence in Foe's house after he has eloped from his creditors. Friday accompanies her wherever she goes; Susan Barton categorizes him as a slave when she ponders whether he will remain unkissed. While there is no indication that Friday has any desire to be kissed, Susan yearns for physical contact, so she projects her own desires and emotional states on Friday: "Where are you to meet a woman of your fate? Where are you to meet a woman of your own people? We are not a nation rich in slaves. I think of a watch-dog, raised with kindness but kept from birth behind a locked gate." (80) For her benefit one can say she is aware of how compromised her enterprise regarding Friday is. But all doubts are countered by her one fundamental assertion: "He does not understand that I am leading him to freedom. He does not understand what freedom is." (100) Later she has an exchange with Foe revealing how much more she invested in her project for her own sake:

> [Susan:] "He desires to be liberated, as I do too. […] There is an urging that we feel, all of us, in our hearts, to be free; yet which of us can say what freedom truly is?" (149)
>
> [... Foe replies:] "It is but the name we give to the desire you speak of, the desire to be free. What concerns us is the desire, not the name." (149)
>
> [... Susan:] "Friday is no more in subjection than my shadow is for following me around. He is not free, but he is not in subjection. He is his own master, in law, and has been since Cruso's death." (150)

Following the same logic, she presents to the captain the "paper signed in Cruso's name" declaring Friday free, his "papers of manumission." (110) She hopes that the captain will deliver Friday home, not knowing where that could be, but supposing it must be somewhere in Africa. Sensing the futility of her request (and in her reasoning foreshadowing what Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* will say of her feelings for the boy John) she aborts this attempt and resumes her self-imposed responsibility for Friday:

> A woman may bear a child she does not want, and rear it without loving it, yet be ready to defend it with her life. Thus it has become, in a manner of speaking, between Friday and myself. I do not love him, but he is mine. That is why he remains in England. That is why he is here. (111)

After their return to London, she acknowledges Friday's dependence on her, and senses that she has no right to expect gratitude or even love for her enterprise of abducting Friday from the island and calling it an act of liberation. When Foe inquires whether Friday has ever grown enamoured of her, Susan replies: "How are we ever to know what goes on in the heart of Friday? [...] We have lived too close for love, Mr Foe. Friday has grown to be my shadow. Do our shadows love us, for all that they are never parted from us?" (115) Repeatedly Susan Barton directs her thoughts to Friday's inner life, but her sympathetic imagination does not reach far, and Friday's mute resistance stalls her attempts.

### A Strange Duet

Searching through Foe's belongings (yet another act of appropriation on Susan's side) Susan Barton comes across some recorders (*Blockflöte*); she takes the smallest and hands it to Friday: "The next morning I heard him toying with it; soon he had so far mastered it as to play the tune of six notes I will forever associate with the island and Cruso's first sickness." (95) Back then Friday had played it over and over on his "little reed flute." (28) As Friday again repeats this tune over and over again, Susan comes to remonstrate him, finding him "spinning slowly around with the flute to his lips and his eyes shut." (95) It occurs to Susan "that if there were any language accessible to Friday, it would be the language of music." (96) She practices Friday's tune and joins in with his tune the next morning, "first in unison with him, then in the intervals when he was not playing." (96) This seems one of the genuine moments of Susan connecting with Friday, but it remains tainted and incomplete: "The music we made was not pleasing: there was a subtle discord all the time, though we seemed to be playing the same notes. Yet our instruments were made to play together, else why were they in the same case?" (96) The same could be said of their souls, which are both trapped in each respective body. Susan belittles this by musing whether this might count as conversation after all – still trapped in her world of words and meaning: "Is conversation not simply a species of music in which first the one takes up the refrain and then the other?" (96) Instead of finding satisfaction in this precious moment of shared attention and coherence, Susan soon gets tired and reminds herself of her self-imposed duty to educate Friday. She tries to teach Friday other tunes: "[W]e cannot forever play the same tune and be content. Or so at least it is with civilized people." (97) Friday does not respond but continues with ever the same tune, seeming to be in a "trance of possession, and his soul more in Africa than in Newington." (98) Her irritation produces tears, and she senses in him a "disdain for intercourse with [her]." (98) As readers we become acutely aware of the strong desire in Susan to connect with others, to validate herself and her narrative through others, in this case Friday. We feel her pain and follow through her motions of surprise, discomfort, irritation and anger: "Watching him whirling in his dance, I had to hold back an urge to strike him and tear the wig and robes away and thus rudely teach him he was not alone on this earth." (98) The frustration of Susan Barton at this point might give occasion to the reader's sympathetic imagination, allowing the reader to feel her disappointment and share it empathetically.

**Pas de Deux - It always takes two**

At one point, Susan Barton reports to Foe (in letters that never reach him) that Friday discovered Foe's robes in a wardrobe. Friday dons the robes and dances a curious dance, which closely resembles the dance of a dervish, who keeps spinning in a circle with arms spread out wide in an attempt to lose himself and reach spiritual ecstasy and celestial communion. She writes: "In the grip of dancing he is not himself. He is beyond human reach." (92) On the road to Bristol, while Friday is absent (who has gone off but will soon return), Susan imitates Friday's dance, mirrors what she has observed earlier. At first, she justifies her imitation with the practical reason of drying her clothes. But the dance overrides her rationale, and she believes to have come closer to understanding Friday: "I have discovered why Friday dances in England, I thought, smiling to myself." (103) While thinking this, she enters a trance-like state and only dizzily returns to her actual surroundings. She senses "a glow of after-memory" that makes her realize "there were other lives open to [her] than this one." (104) As sleep allowed the magistrate and Michael K to lose themselves, the dance allows Susan to imagine another life apart from her own. The imitation of Friday's actions would require activity of mirror neurons on her behalf, which helped in recording the movements and imitating them, and might now have opened a space for empathetic engagement. In her last comment we see how previous restraints (similar to Magda being stuck with herself) of her sympathetic imagination might have been loosened. Susan imagines how Friday might have danced to "remove himself, or his spirit, from Newington and England, and from me too" – never has her intuition been closer to a plausible truth about Friday's inner life.

**Friday's Hieroglyphs: Eye to Eye**

"'All my efforts to bring Friday to speech, or to bring speech to Friday, have failed,' I said. 'He utters himself only in music and dancing, which are to speech as cries and shouts are to words. […]'" (142) Along with music and dance there is a third instance of self-representation on the side of Friday. Prompted by Foe, Susan Barton attempts to teach him how to write (her language), employing a "child's slate and pencil." (144) The first words she chooses to teach him are *house*, *Africa*, *mother*, and *ship* (145-146); soon she is frustrated by Friday's apparent lack of understanding: "Long and hard I stared at him, till he lowered his eyelids and shut his eyes. […] I reached out and took him by the chin and turned his face toward me. His eyelids opened." (146) The mechanical and forced nature of this eye contact

stalls empathetic engagement. Susan searches Friday's eyes for a "spark of mockery" to confirm her suspicion that he is pretending to be more stupid than he actually is – she no longer trusts the face value presented by Friday, confused as she is by the incongruous mental images of Friday created by her narrative. The force of her gesture corresponds with the hermeneutical pressure applied by her, fuelled by her desire to fill the gaps of her story, of which Friday has become a part, to unveil the truth concealed by Friday's silence.

Soon after Susan and Foe watch Friday fill the slate with what at first glance seems to be a design of leaves and flowers (cf. the petals he spreads over the pond; see following section): "But when I came closer I saw the leaves were eyes, open eyes, each set upon a human foot: row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes." (147) As she reaches out to take the slate in order to show it to Foe, Friday won't let it go; he "put three fingers in his mouth instead and wet them with spittle and rubbed the slate clean." (ibid.) What could be read as a refusal to be appropriated by Western narrative and its hermeneutics is similar to the resistance Susan Barton shows towards Foe's attempts to appropriate her story into the discourse of the adventure novel envisioned by him.

The "open eyes, each set upon a human foot" have led to various speculations on the side of the critics.[113] Ayo Kehinde points out the connection to the emblematic footprints Defoe's Crusoe had discovered on the beach. Barbara Eckstein sees a depiction of the galleys of a slave ship here, the eyes of the slaves seeing only the feet of sailors.[114] More generally, Claudia Egerer sees Friday's drawings as "contesting the very notion of Friday as empty, as nullified" (Prentice summarizing Egerer). Most originally, Mike Marais has read it as a trope of the "travelling eye/I", which could both refer to imperialist notions of omnivision (these can be traced back to Jacobus Coetzee's ideas of the "spherical eye" in *Dusklands*) as well as to Friday himself as a travelling eye, with no tongue to speak – all perceptions without any form of expression beyond his physical body (therefore the song and dance). Being true to Coetzee's ambiguity, I would accord all of these accounts some credibility. Hardly any of the critics take Susan Barton's explanation seriously, when she relates his drawing to the

[113] Chris Prentice has compiled interpretations in a footnote in his essay *Foe*. (Prentice 2011: 91-112)

[114] Cf. Kehinde 2007; also Eckstein 1996 and Egerer 1999. Mike Marais comments:

> Friday's sketch, which is a graphic evocation of the eighteenth century literary topos of the reader as traveller, constitutes an image of reading within the text and mirrors the reading I/eye who holds the literary object in the grip of his/her 'hermeneutic gaze' (*White Writing* 9). This technique of internal mirroring recurs shortly afterwards when, in the novel's brief concluding section, an unidentified 'I' enters the text and, upon finding the manuscript embarks upon a journey of reading during which he/she reads the opening sentence of the novel (*F* 155). *Foe* thus ends with a striking reflection of the subject position of dominance which the reading I/eye assumes in relation to the text as other. (Marais 1996: 72)

scattering of petals on the surface of a pool of water, a ritual observed by her during her stay on the island. I shall return to this in the final section of this analysis.

Shortly after his first drawings Friday takes Foe's place at the desk, as Susan had done before; yet another comment on positions of narrative authority and the evocation of shifts taking place, this time in favour of Friday and signalling his ascension to narrative authority beyond the realm of words and narrative texture. Friday writes endless rows of zeros or the letter 'o', on which Foe comments she should teach him the letter 'a' next. (152) Atwell picks up on this and remarks that this might be hinting at the alpha and the omega; the omega representing the end of the story, and Foe asking for a beginning to make the story complete or at least give it a beginning that might help to make sense of the end. (Atwell 1991) The third section ends here.

None of the self-expressions elicited from Friday by Susan Barton allow her to bridge the gap between her narrative and the ever-silent core of Friday's story, which remains unattainable or rather unintelligible for her. Her attempt to "to build a bridge of words" to return Friday to the "world of words" (60) has failed. Susan Barton remains an insubstantial paper being, with Friday trapped as her bodily shadow.

### 3.1.4 Silences

Coetzee artfully links Susan Barton's narrative – with its own blank spots – to the story of Friday, which remains concealed through the absence of a tongue that could translate it into terms of narrative. "That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday's tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday." (118) As shown above, the hermeneutic enterprise of giving Friday a for(u)m of expression has failed. "Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost!" (67) Friday's silence is both symptomatic of the cruelties suffered under colonial exploits and the lack of voice as discussed by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988), which discusses both the position of the colonial subject that has no voice and the speaking for others attempted by colonial cultural production.[115] Susan Barton suspects Cruso of having mutilated Friday; thinking of their seemingly peaceful coexistence on the island this seems highly unlikely, but Susan Barton can be stubborn in her narrative assumptions: "Better had he drawn his teeth instead!" (95) This once again reflects her deep fears of cannibalism, here metonymically condensed to

[115] See also Spivak 1990.

the symbol of teeth. Foe also senses the importance of Friday's fate, and calls it "the heart of the story," or better even "the eye of the story" (141) – the slight shift from heart to eye corresponds with the picture of "eyes on feet"; a shift that can also be applied to a more general sense of this novel being concerned more with matters of perception and intellectual appropriation rather than matters of the heart. In another instance of Susan's musings she notes: "The tongue is like the heart, in that way, is it not? Save that we do not die when a knife pierces the tongue. To that degree we may say the tongue belongs to the world of play, whereas the heart belongs to the world earnest." (85) *Foe* as a narrative remains in the realm of tongues, only barely touching issues of the heart. The absence of Friday's story corresponds with his first appearance and Susan Barton's initial impression of him as a dark shadow with a halo: "The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue." (117)[116] The halo could be seen to resemble the aura Friday attains by remaining impenetrable to the hermeneutic discourse of penetration; that Susan Barton takes part in this discourse can be seen in her sexual domination of Cruso and Foe, something Friday is never subjected to – the physical intimacy resembles a relinquishing of narrative power.

Mike Marais offers a compelling analysis of how Coetzee utilizes Friday's silence in terms of postcolonial empowerment:

> In his representations of the silent other, Coetzee invests silence with power: silence is cast as the means by which the other preserves its alterior status against assimilation by the West. [...] Silence is neither a sign of submission nor merely a strategy of passive resistance, but a counter-strategy through which the other preserves, even asserts, its alterior status and in so doing interrogates the fixity of dominant power structures and positions. (Marais 1996: 74f; echoing Gayatri Spivak)

Friday's counter-strategy of maintaining his alterior status forestalls acts of empathy, for this requires the perception of similarity, preceded by a general acknowledgement of alterity. In the case of Friday, the alterity remains almost absolute, so that Barton's sympathetic imagination finds no leverage to approximate their positions. Marais continues:

> For Coetzee, then, silence is not, as Salman Rushdie would have it, "the ancient language of defeat" (89). It is a potent political tool through which the other escapes and challenges the "conceptual constraints of imperial cultures whose programmes of conquest and annihilation are enshrined in language" (WW 176). (Marais 1996: 75)[117]

What remains of Friday, when the hermeneutic enterprise of Susan (and Foe) fails? Like in *Life & Times of Michael K,* the simple standard erected by Coetzee in regard to Friday is the body, which in this case includes the inscribing of pain and torture, etched into the memory of

[116] The trope of the shadow existence is repeatedly applied to Friday by Susan: "Friday is no more in subjection than my shadow is for following me around. He is not free, but he is not in subjection. He is his own master, in law, and has been since Cruso's death." (150)

[117] Marais is here referring to Rushdie, Salman. *Shame*. London: Pan Books, 1984.

the body, visible as scars and absences. In Susan's terms, it is a state of insufficiency, of inadequacy, comparable to that of a child:

> What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself?), what he is to the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. He is the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born. Whereas the silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence. (121f)

In spite of his silence, Friday remains not only a "substantial body" (which in itself should be considered sufficient and adequate), but also forms the silent centre of the narrative, which in all its turns briefly illuminates the background story of Susan but far more prominently focuses on Friday's hidden story.

### 3.1.5 The Final Passage

> In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story. I ask: Why was Friday drawn into such deadly peril, given that life on the island was without peril, and then saved? (141)

The peril Foe refers to here draws on two of his constructions, the one involving an enormous kraken hidden beneath a bed of seaweeds, the other imagining a ship at the bottom of the pool with all its dead people (slaves and sailors) staring up at Friday while he rows on the surface of the pool and spreads petals over the water, as if he is commemorating the lost souls. To the reader Foe's thrill-seeking comment bears some irony, since Friday is more at peril in London than he ever was on the island. Susan initially surmises Friday's ritual to be an "offering to the god of the waves to cause the fish to run plentifully, or performing some other such superstitious observance." (31) Rosemary Jolly, like Marais drawing on Spivak, summarizes Coetzee's narrative setup in *Foe*:

> The figure of Friday, noncenter of the narrative of Foe (as Susan Barton keeps on pointing out to Foe), can be situated at the nexus between these two "contradictory" (from our point of view) movements in postcolonialism, namely the maintenance of a mimetics that is not simplistically recuperative but is nevertheless recreative, and the simultaneous refusal of a fixed referent. (Jolly 1996: 144)

To the reader the centre (or anchor) of the narrative remains obscure. We reach no comprehensive understanding of Susan Barton and her lost daughter, of Cruso and how he came to live on the island, of Foe and his debts, and ultimately of Friday and the story of his mutilation. In *White Writing* Coetzee poetically compares the reflecting surfaces of water pools with earth's eyes staring at the sky. In a similar vein, Foe remarks:

> "I said the heart of the story," resumed Foe, "but I should have said the eye, the eye of the story. Friday rows his log of wood across the dark pupil – or the dead socket – of an eye staring up at him from the floor of the sea. He rows across it and is safe. To us he leaves the task of descending into that eye. Otherwise, like him, we sail across the surface and come shore none the wiser, and resume our old lives, and sleep without dreaming, like babes." (141)

Foe's comment anticipates the final fourth section of the novel, the point of which he seems to foreshadow: "It is for us to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear." (142) This is the roar that issues from the lips of Friday in the very final lines of the narrative. In section IV (no quotation marks!) an unnamed narrator enters a sunken ship, then the home of Foe. A girl sits on the landing (maybe Susan's lost daughter), Foe and Susan lie in bed together, Friday on the floor next to them, wrapped in "soft, heavy stuff" (a body bag?). The unnamed visitor touches Friday's hair, testing its quality.

> After a long while, [...] he stirs and sighs [...] The sound his body makes is faint and dry, like leaves falling over leaves. [...] His teeth part. [...]
> At first there is nothing. Then, if I can ignore the beating of my own heart, I begin to hear the faintest faraway roar: as she said, the roar of waves in a seashell; and over that, as if once or twice a violin-string were touched, the whine of the wind and the cry of a bird.
> Closer I press, listening for other sounds: the chirp of sparrows, the thud of a mattock, the call of a voice.
> From his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the islands. (154)

Two asterisks mark the end of this passage, after which the narrator enters a house, remarking on a plaque marking it as the house of Daniel Defoe (not Foe!). While it was night in the first sequence, we now read "a bright autumn day." (155) The personnel in the room is nearly the same (the girl is omitted); the visitor notices a scar running around Fridays neck, "left by a rope or chain" (marking him as ex-slave and as a tortured body). In a dispatch box the visitor finds Susan Barton's text and begins reading its first sentence, marked by quotation marks. The text continues as before in the first person narrative only now the narrative "I" re-enacts Susan's slipping out of her boat, thereby re-entering the narrative beginning of *Foe*, only now being caught in seaweed and descending into the pool where Friday casts his petals. The "stub of candle" (156) carried around the neck is useless; no hermeneutic light will shine in these depths. The "mud of Flanders" (the infamous battlefield WW II) is invoked as the narrative voice crawls into the wreck, situating its individual fate in a long history of death (shortly after, the wreck is dated back three hundred years, quite likely dating the given account in Coetzee's present time). In the cabin, behind the bloated bodies of Susan Barton and the captain, Friday sits in the corner, "half-buried in sand, his knees drawn up, his hands between his thighs" and a "chain about his throat." (157) The narrative voice addresses him by name, which approximates it to the voice of Susan Barton:

> But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday. (157)

The foregrounding of Friday's body as his primary and incorruptible signifier complies with Coetzee's idea of embodiment as a central function of literary representation. Like in the first sequence, the visitor wants to hear Friday's voice, only now his fingernails probe the closed mouth of Friday for a way of entry. Just then:

> His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (157)

The final words of *Foe* direct our attention to the face of the narrative I, in whose shoes we have been walking and diving through this final section, submerging ourselves into the narrative. In the light of my larger argument, this passage is a strong example for how Coetzee manages to manipulate the reader and awaken our sympathetic imagination. The shift of narrative position and focalization in this last section redirects our narrative attention and shifts our position beyond a mere observer, luring us into an inside perspective.

As readers we are strongly invested in the focalisation of the final passage. At this point, we have lost any certainty as to who is speaking the narrative. At first the reader will assume that the first person perspective still refers to Susan Barton, as she has narrated all previous sections in the first person present tense. This assumption gets tested when a female dead body appears; one might argue that it now is the disembodied narrative voice of Susan Barton speaking, visiting her own history and seeing her own dead body. This idea might lead to the competing notion of the voice of Coetzee entering his own text in the first person form – not all too implausible considering Coetzee's fondness of literary experiments and metafictional and metanarrative interruptions and intrusions.[118] In the second passage the same options could be considered. So far the narrative visitor was in a neutral mode of observation, making its way into the setting, but taking no action and not interfering with the scene. The unexpected turn of events as the narrative voice enters the narrative and takes action topples all previous assumptions of a disembodied narrator. We as readers can no longer avoid inhabiting the narrative point of view, having lost all footing of where to locate the narrative I. Coetzee's handling of perspective draws us into the text, forces us to inhabit the central perspective and look into the century-old face of slavery, condensed in the face of

[118] This taste for experiments can be seen in his criticism, linguistic studies, fictions and reading preferences: "But I must say that I get impatient with fiction that doesn't try something that hasn't been tried before, preferably with the medium itself." (Auster/Coetzee 2013: 165)

Friday, who speaks for all of them as his roar flows out to all corners of earth. This account should move any reader and touch his emotions, ultimately awakening our empathy in listening to the pain of Friday closing this narrative.[119]

Rosemary Jolly speaks of the "helplessness of power" (read: narrative authority) being demonstrated in the final section exposing the "heartlessness of the enterprise of representation." (Jolly 1996: 7) According to her postcolonial reading, "[t]his violence [of representation] becomes evident, ironically, when the narrative fails to master its subjects: when it 'loses its voice.'" (Jolly 1996: 3) In her reading Susan Barton narrates the final section, but at the very end makes way for the embodied Friday, "speaking in the voice of the unnamed, indeterminate narrator." (Jolly 1996: 144) Helen Tiffin sees Coetzee's narrative method as "continually rehearsing Friday's silence itself as the interpretative problem which fractures all the potential narratives Barton and Foe attempt to construct." (Tiffin 1987: 30-31) The argument continues:

> In the final chapter of the novel he dispenses with the author, Foe, whose image now coalesces with that of the Captain, Cruso/e, and all of white slaving imperial history and its complicit narrativization, and with the female "castaway" Susan Barton. The "I" narrator now becomes "Coetzee," who, as author still necessarily the "foe" of alterity, but who now situates himself directly in relation to Friday and Friday's potential for speech. (Tiffin 1987: 31)

Dominic Head, citing Ina Gräbe, also proposes that Coetzee himself enters the narrative, as suggested above:

> [T]he final section represents the most self-conscious diegetic level, so that the appearance of a voice representing Coetzee permits the author to occupy the 'privileged position of the ultimate focalizer of the previous three levels'. This also demands of the reader 'a reassessment of the entire foregoing enterprise'. [...] Indeed, the effect of the final section is to offer a compromise rather than an authorial imposition. (Head 1997: 123)

This argument tunes in well with the entire text's questioning of narrative authority. Denis Donaghue is quoted by Robert Post: "I take it to be the voice of the poetic imagination." (Post 1989: 152) Post also quotes Jane Gardam as being convinced that in these pages "Coetzee himself goes searching for the body of Friday, seeking it in the waters off the island in the wreckage of the slave ship." (Post 1989: 153) Post himself offers another reading:

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[119] In the first section of the narrative Susan uses earplugs to "shut out the sound of the wind. So I became deaf, as Friday was mute; what difference did it make on an island where no one spoke?" (35) The roaring wind corresponds with the roar emitted from Friday's mouth in the final section, and Susan's refusal to listen is telling. On another level, she seems to attempt to equal Friday's lack of his speaking faculty, but oddly by shutting off her hearing. If she were interested in a shared experience, not talking and thereby turning mute would be a more adequate but just as pointless an exercise. Instead, she closes off her receptive faculty in favour of her transmitting faculty; Susan Barton must insist to maintain her sender position for the sake of her narrative, holding on to her authority. Giving up her narrative authority would mean the immediate end of the story, but by keeping it she can impossibly achieve any more intimate proximity and understanding of Friday: she is caught in her own world of words and meanings.

> Another possibility is that Susan Barton continues to speak in these final pages as she has done throughout the narrative […] Through his speaker, Susan Barton, the poetic imagination of Coetzee is calling out for nonwhite South Africans to be permitted speech so that their plight will be heard and recognized throughout the world. (Post 1989: 152-53)

Apart from the last bit about a direct reading it cannot be dismissed too easily. Though a literary-minded reader would most likely prefer more complex interpretations, such as that offered by Sue Kossew:

> Coetzee's rewriting of this ending evokes a complex and ambivalent response: Friday's "voice" still has no words ("bodies are their own signs") and the author-figure of the final section is unable to resist its power ("it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face"), yet avoids speaking *for* Friday, allowing his voice to emerge only in a metaphoric way. It could be argued that, after the models of authorship rejected in the previous sections, this model most closely approximates that of Wilson Harris's "infinite rehearsal" (and the repetition, echoing and rewriting of previous sections reinforces this reading), which seeks to avoid appropriation, absorption and betrayal of the subject by restructuring patriarchal language. (Kossew 1996: 175; drawing on: Maes-Jelinek 1989)

One critic sees a possible connection to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Mike Marais an allusion to Wordsworth – the second thought more original and likely (Marais 1998b: 57). Surely many more varieties of similar and maybe more ingenious readings are imaginable. The final section takes seriously Walter Benjamin's notion of the end of a narrative representing death (in: *Der Erzähler*, 1936/37), which Rukmini Nair could be imagined giving a comment on in her volume *Narrative Gravity*:

> Death. The point has been made before that the end of a story anticipates death. The closing of the narrative sequence, its coda, marks a formal separation from all the other cogs still merrily spinning along. It metaphorically describes the final dissolution of the 'self'. (Nair 2003: 24)

### 3.1.6 Closing Remarks - Not quite empathetic, at least not yet!

On their way to Bristol Susan once again muses on whether Friday has a cannibal past, pondering whether he is 'unclean' and should be repelling to her:

> I grant without reserve that in such thinking lie the seeds of madness. We cannot shrink in disgust from our neighbour's touch because his hands, that are clean now, were once dirty. We must cultivate, all of us, a certain ignorance, a certain blindness, or society will not be tolerable. (106)

This could also have been voiced in a similar fashion by Coetzee's later heroine Elizabeth Costello, who reserves her vegetarian habits for her own food. Susan Barton's sets a good example of cultivating "a certain ignorance, a certain blindness" in order to overcome initial prejudices and fears in her approach to Friday; however, the same blindness and ignorance had been cultivated for far too long to allow her to actually bridge the gap between her and Friday, to combine their narratives into one grand narrative; the stories are too disparate, each

with its own gaps and holes. Coetzee's lets Susan make a first step, but also shows the limits of her still colonial imagination, which is not quite empathetic, at least not yet.

With the formal means of narrative Coetzee has taken us by the hand and led us towards a narrative dissolution of our selves, allowing us a glimpse of the other, sounding the echo of its anonymous roar. The staging of otherness has reached the centre stage of narrative attention in *Foe*:

> Otherness, then, is at stake in every literary text, and in a particularly conspicuous way in the text that disrupts the illusions of linguistic immediacy and instrumentality. Among these texts are some in which the other is thematized as a central moral and political issue, and in these texts the capacity of formal techniques to stage otherness can be exploited with particular force and relevance. J. M. Coetzee's novels are cases in point. (Attridge 1998: 204)

## 3.2 *Age of Iron* (1990) – Urban Isolation

### 3.2.1 Up Close and Personal

*Age of Iron* marks a significant shift in Coetzee's choice of protagonists and settings for his fictions from the allegorical towards a realist representation of South Africa under apartheid. The tone becomes more personal, and the realist setting of Cape Town comes closer to his own situation. The main character Elizabeth Curren held an academic position teaching literature in Cape Town, South Africa, just like Coetzee himself. The increased intimacy of tone is not so much due to the setting but reflects the thematic engagement with parental affiliation and filial remonstration. *Age of Iron* began as an epistolary novel in which Coetzee, writing from a first person perspective, addressed his mother Vera, who had died shortly before.[120] Coetzee, however, decided to give up the autobiographical perspective, and adopted the perspective of a mother writing to her daughter about her growing political awareness.

The dedication of *Age of Iron* presents three sets of initials and the respective life dates of his mother: V.H.M.C. (1904-1985), his father: Z.C. (1912-1988) and his son: N.G.C. (1966-1989). In a short period of about five years Coetzee lost both his parents and his son; the son's untimely death resulting from an accident. The dedication for *Age of Iron* has a commemorating function, honouring the dead. Coetzee's work of mourning is continued even more openly in *The Master of Petersburg*, but removed in time and place to Russia at the end of the 19th century (see 3.3).

[120] At a conference in Gießen in 2012, David Atwell discussed the early manuscripts of *Age of Iron*, now made available at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Austin, Texas. The results of his research will be made available in more detail in Atwell's forthcoming intellectual biography of Coetzee.

### 3.2.2 A Dead Place

> There is an alley down the side of the garage, you may remember it, you and your friends would sometimes play there. Now it is a dead place, waste, without use, where windblown leaves pile up and rot. (AI 3)[121]

With these opening words Coetzee leads us into the epistolary imagination of Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*, by which she mourns bygone days of her daughter's childhood, as if reclaiming those memories from the "dead place" was as futile as Orpheus' attempt to reclaim Eurydice from the land of the dead.[122] Elizabeth Curren addresses her daughter, whose position we inhabit via the "you" we read in her address; in the case of a South African reader, the resonance of a shared collective memory will certainly be stronger than to readers from elsewhere.

As opposed to Susan Barton, who even in her letters would use the first person present tense, Elizabeth Curren narrates events in the past tense, but in close proximity to the events narrated, speaking of "[y]esterday" and "now". (3) The suggestive immediacy of her reflections resembles a diary, or even a deathbed confession: "To embrace death as my own, mine alone. / To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me." (6) Curren conflates writer (I) and addressee (you), in the narrative herself and her daughter, beyond the narrative author and reader. Here Coetzee lets Curren comment on the singularity of death, which is always experienced individually; but the quote also hints at the self-reflexive nature of any address: in encountering others we find ourselves. The theme foreshadows Coetzee's later autobiographical fiction *Summertime*, which enacts a *post mortem* self-analysis, in this regard surpassing Elizabeth Curren's *ante mortem* narrative.

Curren starts her writing after she has received a terminal cancer diagnosis, which gives her narrative voice a twist of Walter Benjamin's *Erzähler*, whose death ends all narrative, but who also postulates death as a precondition for all narrative. In Curren's words of a binary logic: "Death may indeed be the last great foe of writing, but writing is also the foe of death." (115-116) In her case the terminal sickness constitutes a beginning of sorts; the impulse to leave the cave of unwitting complicity and see the light of the harsh truth of apartheid.[123]

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[121] Coetzee 1990. All quotes in section 3.2 will be from AI unless indicated otherwise.

[122] Sam Durrant extensively discusses the works of Maurice Blanchot and the myth of Orpheus in relation to *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg* (Durrant 2004).

[123] Fiona Probyn offers an astute reading of *Age of Iron*, relating cancer and Apartheid to each other. At one point she remarks: "Cancer in particular problematizes the inside/outside, self/other distinction which constitutes or fortifies perceptions of a unified self because it is anomalous and abject; one example (of many) is that tumours located *inside* the body of the cancer patient are referred to by doctors as "non-self", suggesting that the discourse of oncology generates ontological confusion." (Probyn 1998: 214; original emphasis) Probyn is aware

The novel opens with Elizabeth Curren's encounter with Vercueil in that dead place, and in the end he is at her side when the final moment comes. In my reading I shall mainly concentrate on her relation with Vercueil and with John, Bheki's friend.

### 3.2.3 Unlikely Companions

#### The Smells and Dirty Fingernails of Vercueil

Vercueil enters the narrative as a "derelict. […] Asleep in his box, his legs stretched out like a marionette's, his jaw agape. […] Unclean." (4)[124] He is described as "tall, thin, with a weathered skin and long, carious fangs, wearing a baggy gray suit and a hat with a sagging brim." (3) From the very beginning Elizabeth Curren marks him as "unclean," a line continued in her perception of his smell: "For a while I stood staring down at him, staring and smelling." (4) The physical body is again foregrounded in the encounter, as opposed to cultural assumptions and prejudices. Curren perceives Vercueil as "[a] presence or a smell." (13) She makes no effort to hide her disgust at his bodily presence, but not without "a flicker of embarrassment" about her own attitude. (84) The clash of different sets of personal hygiene is obvious. The text invites the reader to overcome this disgust, to sweep it aside in order to allow the encounter to grow into something more, something approximating companionship, however unlikely it may seem. The embarrassment about being repelled is already an advanced level of self-awareness and attests her will to overcome the conventions insidiously imbibed in a lifetime of segregation. When they are out searching the hospitals for Bheki's friend, she and Vercueil at one point end up waiting for Florence and Bheki: "In silence we waited in the car, Vercueil and I, like a couple married too long, talked out, grumpy. I am even getting used to the smell, I thought." (70) At one point they are in her kitchen, and Vercueil cuts himself a slice of bread:

> His fingernails filthy. Who knows what else he had been touching. And this is the one to whom I speak my heart, whom I trust with last things. Why this crooked path to you?
> My mind like a pool, which his finger enters and stirs. Without that finger, stillness, stagnation.
> A way of indirection. By indirection I find direction out. A crab's walk.
> His dirty fingernail entering me. (82)

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that Coetzee made a similar connection: "In an essay entitled 'The Mind of Apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-),' Coetzee traces the development of the association between apartheid and metaphors of disease through the work of Geoffrey Cronjé, who was a founding 'thinker' behind the formulation of apartheid." (Probyn 1998: 221) See also Marais 1998b: 228.

[124] This potentially invites a discussion of Kleist's essay on the *Marionettentheater* and how the machine/automaton effect of Coetzeean others might support the intellectual distancing mechanism and favour narrative empathy.

This passage highlights how overcoming her distaste for his "filthiness" opens up new possibilities for her thinking, and consequently her changed attitude towards Vercueil, whose "dirty fingernails" are stirring the "pool of her mind" – not the domain of the soul, at least not yet. The reader accompanies her from a state of being repelled to a state of actually longing for his touch, in spite of his unclean appearance and the "faint haze of alcohol about him." (82)

**Life Stories, Smiles and Mutual Grinning**

Their verbal exchanges are not all recorded in Elizabeth's letter to her daughter – the text makes us aware of omissions, but over the course of the novel the reader acquires more and more information about the backgrounds of both of them. The name Vercueil is first mentioned when Curren announces his presence to her maid Florence about him: "Vercueil, Verkuil, Verskuil. That's what he says. I have never come across such a name before. I am letting him stay here for a while. He has a dog […]"(37) The name of Elizabeth Curren is first indicated in a note to Florence signed E.C. (41) Between Curren and Vercueil no introduction takes place, placing their encounter outside of conventional social contact.

Early on, it is Elizabeth Curren who shares stories from her life, such as a childhood story of her mother, or shows him a picture of her daughter, which she then regards "through his eyes" (31), applying her sympathetic imagination and exercising perspective-taking, one of the vital steps on the road towards empathy. Later she also mentions to him the removal of one of her breasts; probably the most intimate detail about her body she could possibly share with him. (166) Sharing all this, she expects Vercueil to equally share his stories in return: "It was time for him to say something now, about hills or cars or bicycles or about himself or his childhood. But he was stubbornly silent." (17) Similar to Friday in *Foe*, Vercueil displays a resistance to reveal himself to her; but his resistance is temporary and softens up. When he does reveal facts about himself, such as the fact that he was at sea (84) – later adding that he worked at the SPCA, at their kennels; like David Lurie in *Disgrace* (187) – Elizabeth Curren is unsure how reliable his narrations are, and we as readers share her doubts. But by the time he relates the story of how his hand was crushed by a pulley when abandoning a ship (186), it is not met primarily with doubt but with curiosity:

> I always knew he had a story to tell, and now he begins to tell it, starting with the fingers of one hand. A mariner's story. Do I believe it? Verily, I do not care. There is no lie that does not have at its core some truth. One must only know how to listen. (187)

Along with the attention she directs at his words, her attention is also directed at his body:

> I pinched his ring finger lightly. “Can’t you feel anything?”
> “No. The nerves are dead.” (187)

That he permits her to touch his disfigured finger shows how their intimacy has grown, but the asymmetry of sensation reflects the narrative asymmetry – the sensations occur almost exclusively within Elizabeth Curren, of others we only get to know what she attempts to imagine.

Elizabeth Curren like Susan Barton in *Foe* cannot help herself but pry for more details, but of course her curiosity is not satisfied when Vercueil offers: “I was at sea.” (84) Curren pries on, claiming her curiosity about her companion to be “quite natural.” To this Vercueil simply shakes his head:

> He gave that crooked smile of his in which one canine suddenly reveals itself, long and yellow. You are hiding something, I thought, but what? A tragic love? A prison sentence? And I broke into a smile myself.
> So we stood smiling, the two of us, each with our private cause to smile. (84)

In this instance we feel the acceptance of otherness on her side. They can share a smile, even if its cause remains private. They are not yet smiling at each other, but the empathetic approximation is progressive. The distance she keeps in the beginning didn’t stop her from having intimations of the bond existing between them: “Two souls, his and mine, twined together, ravished.” (30) After their separate but synchronous smiles Elizabeth Curren even imagines a shared future for the two of them:

> A pity, I thought (my last thought before the pills took me away): we could set up house, the two of us, after a fashion, I upstairs, he downstairs, for this last little while. So that there will be someone at hand in the nights. For that is, after all, what one wants in the end: someone to be there, to call to in the dark. Mother, or whoever is prepared to stand in for mother. (85)

The parent-child relation is evoked repeatedly in the narrative (more instances quoted later in this section), usually with Curren in her capacity as mother. Regarding Vercueil, her projective imagining quoted above inverts the relation, assigning to Vercueil the nurturing and caretaking function. Like a trusting child, Elizabeth holds back little in his presence, as when she cries in the car in front of Vercueil (19) and several times on later occasions, when she exposes her inner states to Vercueil: “But the truth is, I cry more and more easily, with less and less shame. […] A private matter, a disturbance of the pool of the soul, which I take less and less trouble to hide.” (70-71) As the narrative progresses, the reader becomes aware of the growing intimacy between the two.

Their empathetic approximation is mirrored not only in their verbal exchanges, but also in the way their bodies communicate. While Elizabeth Curren repeatedly discourses on

her shame,[125] both in a larger political context as well as in regard to her body, Vercueil seems immune to any sense of decorum, as is illustrated when she finds him sleeping in the bathroom: "The light in the toilet was on. Sitting on the seat, his trousers around his knees, his hat on his head, fast asleep, was Vercueil. I stared in astonishment." (108) This would have evoked her disgust before, but now it simply baffles her. The attention they pay each other takes on more and more substance, their roles of child and parents/guardian repeatedly reversed.

Curren comments on the attention she receives from Vercueil when she wonders why she had agreed to his suggestion of going for a drive: "[W]hat won me in the end was the new attention he was paying me. He was like a boy in a state of excitement, and I was his object. I was flattered; in a distant way, despite all, I was even amused." (117) Interesting is also how she qualifies their outing: "Like lovers revisiting the scenes of their first declarations, we took the mountainside drive above Muizenberg." (118) And Curren continues to imagine the two of them as a couple, as for example when she suggests buying a new hat for him:

> "I would love to buy you a new hat," I said.
> He smiled. I took his arm; slowly we set off along Vrede Street. (167)

While most of their relationship takes place in private, Curren later does not hesitate to state their affiliation to a policeman interrogating her: "Mr. Vercueil takes care of me. Mr. Vercueil is my right-hand man." (173)

Elizabeth Curren shows a remarkable tolerance for behaviour one would consider her to find unacceptable. It is his otherness which causes her to feel sympathy, sometimes close to pity: "Sometimes he does this: contradicts me, provokes me, chips away at me, watching for signs of irritation. It is his way of teasing, so clumsy, so unappealing that my heart quite goes out to him." (180) In this scene she had asked him to fix the aerial of her radio, but Vercueil instead brings the TV to her room and switches it on. The "anthem of the Republic" (*Die Stem van Suid-Afrika,* words by C. J. Langenhoven, 1918) is playing, and Elizabeth asks him to switch it off.

> He wheeled, took in my angry glare. Then, to my surprise, he began to do a little shuffle. Swaying his hips, holding his hands out, clicking his fingers, he danced, unmistakably

[125] Her notion of shame ("Ashes in my mouth day after day after day, which never ceased to taste like ashes." 165) is of course tied to her feeling of complicity with the Apartheid regime, and the novel shows how she comes to realize its brutality and the atrocities involved, that now 'invade' her privacy: "There is a shame to that private knowledge, a shame so warm, so intimate, so comforting that it brings more shame flooding with it. There seems to be no limit to the shame a human being can feel." (119) This resonates with Elizabeth Costello's claim that there are no limits to the sympathetic imagination. More generally speaking, Coetzee continuously explores the limits of our emotional capacities in engaging with others and the self, ultimately suggesting a progressive delimitation with no ultimate goal.

> danced, to music I never thought could be danced to. He was mouthing words too. What were they? Not, certainly, the words I knew.
> "*Off!*" I screamed again.
> An old woman, toothless, in a rage: I must have looked a sight. He turned the sound down. (180)

Vercueil gives in, and in an attempt to console her advises her to have patience waiting for the end of "it all" – he might refer to the apartheid regime and/or her life and all her pain. But with a "toothed leer" (note how the more common phrase *toothless leer* is here inversed) he tells her that she might still have time, an idea she instantly embraces:

> For an instant it was as if the heavens opened and light blazed down. […] He nodded. Like two fools we grinned each at the other. He clicked his fingers suggestively; awkward as a gannet, all feathers and bone, he repeated a step of his dance. (181)

The shared subtle smile from earlier has evolved into the mutual grinning of two fools.[126]

### 3.2.4 Two Hearts in Harmony

#### Bach

After having discussed how these two "[u]nlikely companions" (30) have undergone a transformation in their empathetic approximation, mirrored by their physical closeness and in the way they look at each other, I will now analyze the textual discourse on their hearts in relation to music. Early on, we learn that Elizabeth Curren, lecturer on the classics of Ancient Rome, plays the classics on the piano: Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," Chopin, Brahms. (23) Having tired from the "sweetness of Brahms," she closes her eyes and plays chords, searching for what she calls "my chord" (23), "the lost chord, the heart's chord." (24) As if to underline the spirituality of this moment, the tune "Jerusalem"[127] comes to her together with sentimental childhood memories; but the moment fades and she returns to playing Bach's "first fugue from Book One." (24) She finds Vercueil overhearing her:

> I was playing for myself. But at some point a board creaked or a shadow passed across the curtain and I knew he was outside listening.
> So I played Bach for him, as well as I could. [...] Has it made its way into the heart too of the man in the sagging trousers eavesdropping at the window? Have our two hearts, our organs of love, been tied for this brief while by a cord of sound? (24)

The music still echoing in her heart, she makes an effort to transpose her perception to the perspective of Vercueil, asking herself whether some communion has taken place through the

[126] With Coetzee's essay on Erasmus of Rotterdam in mind, one would concede that there lies much wisdom in their folly. (Coetzee 1996: 83-103)
[127] "And did those feet from Ancient Times" by William Blake, 1804-1810. Since 1916 the song version by Hubert Parry has become part of British heritage, at first serving as the official hymn of the British *Women's Institute*, today being performed before international cricket games as well as at the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011.

shared experience of this music. Another time she listens to a recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and knows that Vercueil will hear it as well, being outside the window smoking. "Perhaps he saw me, perhaps not. Together we listened. / At this moment, I thought, I know how he feels as surely as if he and I were making love." (30) She expands her imagining, even though "it fill[s] [her] with distaste", envisioning their bodies pressed together in a crowded touring bus taking them through Sicily – hard to imagine this in segregated South Africa. Curren is not unaware of the incommensurateness of their music experience, and the insect image she chooses to draw on as point of reference indicates this:

> Across the courtyard he squatted, smoking, listening. Two souls, his and mine, twined together, ravished. Like insects mating tail to tail, facing away from each other, still except for a pulsing of the thorax that might be mistaken for mere breathing. Stillness and ecstasy. (30)

Being reminded of their real environment of apartheid, she takes refuge to the love-making of insects as an analogy for the only possible kind of sexual relationship between a coloured man and a Caucasian woman – as whites were called under apartheid; nobody must notice (stillness) despite the "ecstasy". The distance in space (a courtyard apart) contrasts with the assumed interlocking of their souls, the heightened intensity reflected in the love-making of the insects that intimates physical proximity, which then is countered by the perceptive attention being directed away from each other – twice removed this reflects the apartheid experience of being separated spatially but sharing the same fundamental humanity.

**Birdsong**

After the incident at her house with Bheki's friend John (see 3.2.5 and 3.2.7) and her subsequent eloping into the streets, Vercueil finds her and carries her to a "dark wooded place" (potentially a *locus amoenus*), prompting her to say: "'I am so happy to see you,' […] the words coming from my heart, heartfelt." (161) After a drink from his bottle (no hesitation even though she knows the alcohol will not quench her thirst; they are living on his terms at this moment) she falls asleep. She awakes noticing his arm "flung […] across [her] neck":

> I could have freed myself, but preferred not to disturb him. So while by slow degrees the new day broke, I lay face to face with him, not stirring. His eyes opened once, alert, like an animal's. "I am not gone," I murmured. The eyes closed.
> The thought came: Whom, of all beings on earth, do I know best at this hour? Him. Every hair of his beard, every crease of his forehead known to me. Him, not you. Because he is here, beside me, now. (162)

They are now "face to face" not "tail to tail" (like the insects in previous quote). With open eyes they confirm each other's presence. They are as close as they could possibly be, both physically and in emotional intimacy. Not surprisingly, this moment is followed by a long

soliloquy of Elizabeth Curren (She: "Do you mind if I talk?" He: "Talk." (162)) reflecting on the death of Bheki's friend John and her own complicity with the apartheid regime, on her responsibilities, giving Vercueil "as full a confession as [she] knows how," claiming to "withhold no secrets" – a claim Coetzee previously deconstructed in his essay on "Confession and Double Thought: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Rousseau."[128] Again not surprisingly, the confession of complicity is immediately contrasted with her notion of being a "good person": "I have been a good person, I freely confess to it. I am a good person still. What times these are when to be a good person is not enough!" (165) However empty the clause "good person" might seem, as readers we cannot deny the efforts she makes, if somewhat clumsy at times, to enrich her bond with Vercueil with substantial companionship.

After Curren finishes her confession she discovers that he is asleep, wondering how much of her confession has been heard by him and whether it mattered in the end. Returning to the mundane, she goes "behind a bush": "Birds were singing all around. […] It was like Arcady." (166)[129] Her renewed awe of nature does not have the character of an epiphany – releasing her bowels counters any such notion –, but might point to an awakening of her faculties of perception, a renewal of her bond with nature, instigated by the bond that has developed between her and Vercueil. Lying down again beside Vercueil on a "flattened-out box in the vacant lot" (166), the "dark wooded place" now turns out to be a profane empty space (i.e. a vacant lot) that might be waiting for something new to be constructed; a fitting place for the construction of their unlikely companionship, for the entwining of their hearts. Elizabeth ponders on how they are exposed to passersby: "That is how we must be in the eyes of angels: people living in houses of glass, our every act naked. Our hearts naked too, beating in chests of glass. Birdsong poured down like rain." (166) This last wonderful image of "raining birdsong" turns their location into an Arcady of their hearts, which both of them have laid bare to each other; by narrative privilege Curren more so than Vercueil.

### 3.2.5 Children of the Revolution

In this section we will watch how Elizabeth Curren learns to change sides by developing empathy. After having warmed up to Vercueil's attention, Curren starts to recognize her house servant Florence's family. She develops an interest for Florence's son Bheki, later her interest shifts to his friend John. When Bheki and his friend have a bicycle

[128] Coetzee 1985 (also DP 251-294). See 5.2.3 for a discussion.
[129] In *Youth*, young John has his epiphany in a public park; it is also preceded by the sounds of nature, in his case the humming of insects (Y 117). See 5.5.2

accident, caused by a police van pushing them into a parking van,[130] John suffers a head wound and bleeds profusely, and is taken to a hospital. Curren and Vercueil go to the hospital and find Bheki's badly injured friend. While presenting to him "some fruit" (an apple and a pear) and receiving no sign of gratitude, she muses about his lack of charm: "I did not like him. I do not like him. I look into my heart and nowhere do I find any trace of feeling for him. As there are people to whom one spontaneously warms, so there are people to whom one is, from the first, cold. That is all." (78) She goes on to remember "an old ginger tom" she had been nursing, once again inviting a human-animal comparison: "Even when he was at his weakest his body was hard, tense, resistant under my hand. Around this boy I felt the same wall of resistance. Though his eyes were open, he did not see; what I said he did not hear." (79) This scene is almost an anti-thesis to the attachment that has developed between her and Vercueil, heightened by the impression she gets when she touches the boy's hand: "It was not a clasp, not a long touch; it was the merest brush, the merest lingering of my fingertips on the back of his hand. But I felt him stiffen, felt an angry electric recoil." (79) Curren is strongly aware of the gap between them, and herself paints a picture of white people as a herd of sheep continuously bleating "I!" "I!" "I!" and being watched over by savage old boars grunting "Death!" "Death!" (80) This series of thoughts allows her to imagine the boy's perspective: "Though it does me no good, I flinch from the white touch as much as he does; would even flinch from the old white woman who pats his hand if she were not I." (80) Speaking of herself (I) in the third person (she) while maintaining her first-person position – posing a non-identity with herself – illustrates perfectly an instance of developing empathy. Recognizing their dissimilarity Elizabeth Curren makes an imaginative effort to take his perspective and thus to further her understanding of the boy. The import of this effort is augmented by her initially stated dislike:

> Children of iron, I thought. Florence herself, too, not unlike iron. After which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth? (50)

As Elizabeth Curren reflects on her short exchange with Florence about children and their role in the struggle against apartheid; for her a matter of inappropriate instrumentalisation, for Florence a matter she takes pride in. After bringing Florence home one day and witnessing her husband at work killing chicken (42-43), Curren is inevitably drawn into these separate lives.

Bheki's friend John enters the scene with a lot of pride (Curren calls it "self-important"), almost immediately imposing on Vercueil by taking his brandy away with the

[130] The description of this accident is similar in its description to the accident Paul Rayment suffers in *Slow Man*.

comment: “They are making you into a dog!” (45) Little later the boys and Vercueil get into a fight, which ends up with Vercueil on the ground getting kicked and lashed with a belt by the boys until Florence, called by Elizabeth Curren, puts an end to it with her commanding voice. Bheki’s friend regards Curren as she enquires from Florence who he is: “I did not like that look: arrogant, combative.” (47) When Florence sides with the boys and derides Vercueil as “rubbish,” Elizabeth Curren sharply replies to her: “There are no rubbish people. We are all people together.” (47) Thinking back to Vercueil’s first appearance, Florence’s assessment is understandable, but Elizabeth is clearly aiming for higher ground when she goes on, “He is my messenger.” (48) Consequently, she has a low regard of Bheki’s friend: “He is nothing to me.” (65) As we can see, she is still making divisions, again showing how arbitrary her previous statement “We are all people together.” is in its actual application.

### 3.2.6 Descent into Gugulethu

When Florence tells Elizabeth Curren about trouble in the township Gugulethu and the involvement of her son, she drives Florence there.[131] Vercueil refuses to accompany them with a simple “Fuck off.” (88)[132] They find Bheki’s dead body laid out in a burned-down school. For Elizabeth Curren this moment is an eye-opener in the most literal sense:

> I was shaking: shivers ran up and down my body, my hands trembled. I thought of the boy’s open eyes. I thought: What did he see as his last sight on earth? I thought: This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again. (102-103)

Elizabeth Curren again makes an effort to imagine herself into the position of the other, now the dead boy Bheki. The repetition of “I thought” parallels her speechlessness. Note how the colon is dropped after the first phrase, as if thinking of the open eyes shifted her perception into a more immediate imagining of his position, yet still presented as thought. The colons used in the following attribute additional weight to every single phrase. Her forever open eyes mirror the eyes of the dead boy (that remain open until someone closes them for him).

Shortly after Curren’s eye-opening moment she directs a comment at her daughter (the “you” in the address again reaching out to the reader as well) on her limited narrative perspective, reminding both her daughter and the reader that she is the only point of focalization in this narrative:

> I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. *It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine.*

[131] Patrick Hayes brilliantly relates this episode to Don Quixote’s descent into the cave of Montesino. (Hayes 2010: 144-145;149)
[132] For a discussion of rudeness in the work of Coetzee see Pollard 2013.

> *Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain. It is my thoughts that you think, my despair that you feel, and also the first stirrings of welcome for whatever will put an end to thought: sleep, death. To me your sympathies flow; your heart beats with mine.*
> Now, my child, flesh of my flesh, my best self, I ask you to draw back. I tell you this story not so that you will feel for me but so that you will learn how things are. It would be easier for you, I know, if this story came from someone else, if it were a stranger's voice sounding in your ear. But the fact is, there is no one else. I am the only one. I am the one writing: I, I. So I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye. (103-104; emphasis added)

In light of my overarching argument this is a crucial moment in Elizabeth Curren's narrative. She explicitly points out to us that we as readers inhabit her perspective, that our sympathetic imagination is evoked by her reflections, that our sympathies are directed by her narrative, that we are led on by her to take part in the movements of her heart and mind.

The second paragraph of above quote more directly addresses her daughter ("my child" instead of "you") and Curren now suggests the daughter should keep her distance, should read with "a cold eye."[133] In terms of empathy this sounds like an instruction manual for Breithaupt's cognitive empathy. First: Approach with caution in taking someone's perspective. Then: Give yourself up to it, but beware of getting too close and taking it for granted. Lastly: Allow the other perspective to affect you, to be embodied in you. Summarily: Allow yourself to inhabit the narrative, but never without caution. The face once again serves as primary site of encounter: "So why should I grieve for him [Bheki]? The answer is, I saw his face. When he died he was a child again." (125) This occurs in yet another of her monologues she shares with Vercueil.

### 3.2.7 Children of the Revolution Part II

The episode in Gugulethu is central both in terms of its position in the centre of the narrative as well as in its effect on E. Curren. But just as her encounter with Vercueil marked the beginning of her soul's journey towards an unachievable redemption, so is her relation with Bheki yet another stage of this journey, or more precisely a final wake-up call to the political struggle.

Her relationship with Bheki's friend marks yet another stage of her transformation. One night the boy John appears in her kitchen, "his forehead with the bullet wound covered

[133] Samantha Vice in her 2010 essay "Truth and Love Together at Last" comments:
> The radical love and trust upon which the soul depends are achieved, the novel suggests, through a different kind of vision and truth. The image of the cold eye is countered by complex images that track the working of this alternative. The images of sight remain, but not 'cold' sight, and often turn to blindness and closed eyes, the sight of the imagination and heart. (Vice 2010: 307)

by white bandage" (133); she takes the boy to be an apparition, a visitation, and accordingly mistakes him for dead Bheki, but then wakes up from her misperception and takes him in: "So this house that was once my home and yours [her daughter's] becomes a house of refuge, a house of transit." (136) This recalls Vercueil's earlier proposition of turning her house into a boarding house. In another direct address of her daughter she ponders her feelings for the boy:

> I do not love this child […]. My heart does not accept him as mine: it is as simple as that. In my heart I want him to go away and leave me alone.
> That is my first word, my first confession. I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. […] How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step: that I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child. Not bright little Bheki, but this one. He is here for a reason. He is part of my salvation. I must love him. But I do not love him. Nor do I want to love him enough to love him despite myself.
> It is because I do not with a full enough heart want to be otherwise that I am still wandering in a fog.
> I cannot find it in my heart to love, to want to love, to want to want to love.
> I am dying because in my heart I do not want to live. I am dying because I want to die.
> Therefore let me utter my second, dubious word. Not wanting to love him, how true can I say my love is for you? For love is not like hunger. Love is never sated, stilled. When one loves, one loves more. The more I love you, the more I ought to love him. The less I love him, the less, perhaps, I love you.
> Cruciform logic, which takes me where I do not want to go! (136-137)

This passage constitutes another act of Elizabeth Curren's sympathetic imagination. She discourses about the movements of her heart, which "must love," but at the same time realizes how her social instincts put up a strong resistance against this insight, her heart not being "full enough." She moves on to connect her capacity to love her daughter to her capacity to love this boy; not a scale with two sides to choose from, but rather a potential that can only be realized in application to both, and for all that matters, to anyone and everything.

She takes the boy in and feeds him. As if in return he reveals his name to her: "John: a *nom de guerre* if ever I heard one." (147) When the police comes looking for the boy at her house and when she realizes that he has lost the right to live, she wants "to embrace him, to protect him." (152) She knows that she cannot change the course of events and confesses helplessly: "I stand on the other side. But on the other bank too, the other bank of the river. On the far bank, looking back." (154) She hereby indicates the distance she has put behind her in her soul's journey so far; so far she had never sided with the state apparatus, but had also not opposed it. Now she has crossed that line. The police force Curren away from the door to Florence's room. In a last attempt of resistance, she resorts to her sickness (cancer) to keep them from forcefully removing her from the scene:

> "Where is the pain?" asked the woman, frowning. "In my heart," I said. She looked puzzled. "I have cancer of the heart." Then she understood; she shook her head as if shaking off flies. (155)

The "cancer" that attacks Curren's heart is an almost beneficial tumour, one that opens her up for a more empathetic engagement with the other, while the cancer that attacks her body will ultimately destroy her.

The boy is shot. In yet another act of sympathetic imagination she imagines John's position at the moment just before he was shot, only this time not inhabiting his perspective, but instead taking the position of a proximate witness ("beside him I stand and hover." 175); just like we as readers are witnesses to the account she gives to her daughter in her letter:

> His eyes are unblinking, fixed on the door through which he is going to leave the world. His mouth is dry but he is not afraid. His heart beats steadily like a fist in his chest clenching and unclenching.
> His eyes are open and mine, though I write, are shut. My eyes are shut in order to see. (175)

Note the emphasis on the embodiment of Curren's sympathetic imagining and how the description of the body is utilized to indicate corresponding inner states, capturing well the intensity of the moment.[134] The shut eyes of Elizabeth Curren mark the act of imagining and point to the inwardness of the process that fuels her transformation.

### 3.2.8 A Letter to Nowhere

#### Blood on Paper

> I remember, when the boy was hurt, how abundantly he bled, how rudely. How thin, by comparison, my bleeding onto the paper here. The issue of a shrunken heart. (137)

Elizabeth Curren writes this in her letter to her daughter, just as everything we read is supposedly contained in this 200-page letter.[135] Attributing lack of propriety to the "rudely" spilling blood bears some irony, which comes to carry in the second statement, where she sees the propriety of her writing as maybe holding back too much. Yet, she isn't really holding back at all, as any reader will see in the course of the novel. The quote above continues as follows:

> I have written about blood before, I know. I have written about everything, I am written out, bled dry, and still go on. This letter has become a maze, and I a dog in the maze, scurrying up and down the branches and tunnels, scratching and whining at the same old places, tiring, tired. (137)[136]

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[134] Cf. Vice 2010: 308.

[135] Patrick Hayes and John Su astutely comment on the satirical nature of employing this form, which they connect to the epistolary novel of 18th-century England, contrasting the narratives of vestal virgins with "pure hearts" about their search for a good husband with the narrative of an old woman with "a shrunken heart" on her search for redemption, both hoping to achieve their ends through acts of love (this is as far as the similarity goes) (Hayes/Su 2010: 133).

[136] Her subsequent phrase „God is another dog in another maze," (138) foreshadows an expression Elizabeth Costello will use in the chapter "At the Gate" in *Elizabeth Costello*.

The maze she has entered is related to the maze Magda finds herself in *In the Heart of the Country*. It is the maze of a heart constricted by years of living with racial segregation. As opposed to Magda, however, Elizabeth Curren is not a young woman struggling to shape her own identity, but instead is confronted with the task of reshaping her imagination. Addressing her daughter proves an ill-conceived attempt to do this: "[W]ith every day I add to it the letter seems to grow more abstract, more abstracted, the kind of letter one writes from the stars, from the farther void, disembodied, crystalline, bloodless. Is that to be the fate of my love?" (137) Towards her distant daughter (living in the US) her voice must seem disembodied, but not for lack of substance, rather due to the increasingly faint connection to her, as the daughter refuses to return to South Africa even for a visit, and Curren cannot muster the courage to travel overseas at her age. She recalls their goodbye at the airport and her daughter's declaration about never returning:

> Then you shook the dust of this country from your feet. There is something as terrible as it is admirable in that will of yours, in the letters you write in which – let me be candid – there is not enough love, or at least not enough of the loving-yielding that brings love to life. Affectionate, kind, confiding even, full of concern for me, they are nonetheless, the letters of someone grown strange, estranged. (139)[137]

This estrangement might bear autobiographical significance and might have been something Coetzee's mother could have said about the son who eloped abroad, leaving her behind: "Come, says this letter: do not cut yourself off from me."[138] Echoing Emile Zola she writes: "*J'accuse*." (139)

The letter is ascribed a variety of functions in the course of the novel, but it is primarily an account of Curren's journey of conscience and her encounter with Florence, Bheki, John, and most prominently Vercueil. As Curren puts it, it is not "a baring of my heart. It is a baring of something, but not of my heart." (15) She cannot lay bare something she herself is only truly discovering in the course of events related in the letter.[139]

Recalling her last conversation with her daughter, whose name is never disclosed to us, she contemplates the emptiness of their exchange, contrasting it with what the letter might be able to convey:

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[137] The same phrase (shaking the dust of a country of your feet) is used also in *Youth* and *Remembering Texas*.
[138] Her first/second/third word would make for another argument, which I will not pursue here.
[139] Marais offers an insight in regard to the intimacy of the letter:

> Thus it [Mrs Curren's text] is presented as an intimate letter from the writer-as-mother to the reader-as-daughter, a letter in which the writer attempts to restore the broken 'filial' connection. Being a letter of 'love,' and therefore the product of a reconstructed ethical consciousness, it constitutes an attempt to represent a mode of intersubjectivity which undermines the state's oppositional relations and, after the manner of the *moly*, restores to the reader – also a victim of the Circe-like state – her humanity." (Marais 1998b: 234; original emphasis)

Note: Moly is a herb given to Ulysses to protect him from Circe's spells.

> On the telephone, love but not truth. In this letter from elsewhere (so long a letter!), truth and love together at last. In every *you* that I pen love flickers and trembles like Saint Elmo's fire; you are with me not as you are today in America, not as you were when you left, but as you are in some deeper and unchanging form: as the beloved, as that which does not die. It is the soul of you that I address, as it is the soul of me that will be left with you when this letter is over. Like a moth from its case emerging, fanning its wings: that is what, reading, I hope you will glimpse: my soul readying itself for further flight. A white moth, a ghost emerging from the mouth of the figure on the deathbed […] – all part of a metamorphosis, part of shaking myself loose from the dying envelope. (129; original italics)
> […]
> The moth is simply what will brush your cheek ever so lightly as you put down the last page of this letter, before it flutters off on its next journey. It is not my soul that will remain with you but the spirit of my soul, the breath, the stirring of the air about these words, the faintest of turbulence traced in the air by the ghostly passage of my pen over the paper your fingers now hold. (130)

This letter "from elsewhere" (from beyond death) is a way of saying goodbye to her daughter. And in the spirit of a deathbed confession she believes to have brought together love and truth – the love she feels for her daughter, and the truth of her life in South Africa under apartheid. The turn of phrase "truth and love together at last" comes slightly surprising, considering other comments made about the mother-daughter-relationship by Curren. Tellingly, those comments refer to actual exchanges, such as the goodbye at the airport when the daughter left, and a long-distance conversation on the phone. Seemingly, the distance implied in the letter-writing – removed in space and delayed in time – is beneficial to their relation; or at least it seems so for Elizabeth Curren. In relation to Breithaupt's blockades, one can imagine how Elizabeth Curren's empathy is enhanced in spite of the distance, promoted through the thought processes recorded in the letter. The familial affiliation of Elizabeth Curren expands in the course of the narrative. New patterns of affiliation emerge. Elizabeth Curren encounters a whole family of black people with whom she forms meaningful attachments: Vercueil-Bheki-John-Florence. They are represented by Curren as substantial characters. In contrast, Mr. Thabane is a generic character about whom we learn next to nothing apart from the views expressed in his conversations with Curren. All white people she encounters also remain rather generic type characters (her doctor who tells her she will die; her neighbours; the policemen and officers). Even about the addressee of the letter, her daughter, we learn only little. The relationship to Vercueil is central to her narrative, with Bheki and John as further steps of her inner transformation. Florence plays a less important part, but is the point of access to the children.

The above-quoted passage finishes with a mention of the actual act of writing, though here only as an idea. In the course of the letter she mentions its actual production only twice, the first time reflecting on the effect the writing has on her:

> I write these words sitting in my bed, my knees pressed together against the August cold. Gratitude: I write down the word and read it back. What does it mean? Before my eyes it grows dense, dark, mysterious. Then something happens. Slowly, like a pomegranate, my heart bursts with gratitude; like a fruit splitting open to reveal the seeds of love. Gratitude, pomegranate: sister words. (55-56)

The writing affects her, causes her "heart to burst open." How the daughter is affected by the reading of the letter we cannot imagine, but we as readers can record the effect it has on us. Most likely we will not follow her example and our hearts will not burst open, but as readers we have been prepared to follow her when the occasion arises. Elizabeth Curren's remark on the double nature of the writing process (including editing), where the writer is also the first reader, granting the writer a depth of perception regarding thes text not available to the reader, who only co-creates the text in a supplementary and largely preconscious fashion. In regard to the sympathetic imagination, this could be a vital difference in its application by the writer and by the reader.

The second time she mentions the act of writing follows a reflection on how she imagines immolating herself publicly and wondering how Florence would perceive her last act, casting her as ultimate judge of her life. Her train of thought is interrupted by John: "His voice startled me as I sat in the kitchen writing." (142) Coetzee is playing with the formal framework of an epistolary novel, which usually is presented as a recollection of events that lie in the past; here it seems there is an immediacy of experience entering the narrative. The text reflects events that lie in the recent past (in the style of a diary), so that the reader's experience is almost synchronous with events recorded. This narrative technique of reporting events in the past tense while conveying immediacy reduces the distance between focalizing consciousness and the reader's perception.

How does the epistolary form relate to the sympathetic imagination and to empathy? On a formal level, the letter highlights the personal tone of Elizabeth Curren, marks the confidentiality of her discourse. As readers we become witness to an inter-personal monologue, a one-sided dialogue with her daughter. The imminent death of Elizabeth Curren lends the narrative the character of an extended goodbye. Curren occupies a non-position as a voice speaking from beyond death. Her letter opens a space within her, and by mirroring her notions the reader might experience a similar opening up. Our sympathetic imagination as readers is primarily directed towards Elizabeth Curren, the only character who gives us full access to her thoughts and emotions (again, the letter genre abets this). As readers we also get to witness her sympathetic imagination engaging with Vercueil, Bheki and John. We see patterns of empathy emerge in her, and as we read these patterns are inscribed into our consciousness.

**Vercueil, the Messenger**

Vercueil plays a central part in Elizabeth Curren's soul journey. In the framing narrative, his function is to send off the letter to Curren's daughter, to deliver her final message. When first asking him for this favour (31), she doubts his trustworthiness: "Private papers. These papers, these words that either you read *now* or else will never read. Will they reach you?" (32)[140] Vercueil finally agrees to send off the parcel to Curren's daughter. (33) Elizabeth Curren imagines how her words gain substance by being read by her daughter, hopes her truth will thereby "take on flesh": "If Vercueil does not send these writings on, you will never read them. You will never even know they existed. A certain body of truth will never take on flesh: my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place." (130) The "truth" – bracketed by colons – is characterized as a report. The "how" of her living (experiences and encounters) is expressed in her narrative through a strong focus on her inner perceptions of her social position; the "what" of her life (dates and events) serves as a backdrop for her empathetic evolution.

As messenger Vercueil inhabits an intermediary position between sender (Curren) and receiver (daughter/reader). His arrival on the scene opens the narrative, giving the impulse for Elizabeth Curren to cultivate her sympathetic imagination, exposing her personal experiences to her daughter and ultimately to the reader in this very long letter. Vercueil delivers her from her rigor and accompanies her on her last journey.

For Elizabeth Curren, the delivery of the letter was a central concern in the beginning, and she struggled hard to make Vercueil agree to deliver it. In the end, the delivery itself comes second to the trust she puts in him. A trust that finds its realization in the empathetic approximation of these two unlikely companions:

> What is the wager, then, that I am making with Vercueil, on Vercueil?
> It is a wager on trust. So little to ask, to take a package to the post office and pass it over the counter. So little that it is almost nothing. Between taking the package and not taking it the difference is as light as a feather. If there is the slightest breath of trust, obligation, piety left behind when I am gone, he will surely take it.
> And if not?
> If not, there is no trust and we deserve no better, all of us, than to fall in a hole and vanish. (130)

Derek Attridge comments on Curren's paradoxical formulations of love and trust, claiming that they form "the ethical core of the text." (Attridge 1994; see also Worthington 2011: 116) The secret imperative guiding Elizabeth Curren compels her to care for others, following the

[140] This motif will return in Dostoevsky's discussion with Councillor Maximov about the papers of Pavel in *The Master of Petersburg*. (MOP 38-40)

formula: “You have to become someone other than yourself.” (119) Samantha Vice in her essay urges all of us to strain our utopian imagination to accommodate the boundlessness of the ethical imperative implied in *Age of Iron*:

> Finally, perhaps the most crucial lesson in light of the content of this ethical vision, is that of realizing just how hard it might be to *live* it. The vision that Mrs. Curren –and Coetzee – is drawn to requires a groundless love and trust that is astonishingly stringent, that makes the responsibility for others boundless, and that may very well require the abdication of deeply entrenched and even admirable habits and principles, the shrugging aside of dignity and the need to be loved oneself. It is both helpful, and necessary for philosophers to have before them some subtly imagined world in which this is the goal, to see just what it entails and how difficult it is. Only by fully inhabiting such a world in intellect, emotion, and imagination can its resources or truthfulness be adequately assessed. (Vice 2010: 312; original emphasis)

### Vercueil/Daughter

> Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written. […] When I write about him I write about myself; when I write about the house I write about myself. Man, house, dog: no matter what the word, through it I stretch out a hand to you. In another world I would not need words. I would appear on your doorstep. “I have come for a visit,” I would say, and that would be the end of words: I would embrace you and be embraced. But in this world, in this time, I must reach out to you in words. (9)

Curren expresses precisely how similarity and difference (he is and is not I) go together to create mutual and self-recognition. By sympathetically imagining Vercueil’s perspective Curren gains access to a written narrative of herself, the words reaching out to her daughter. Curren formulates a three-prong approach of writing this letter: 1) reaching out to her daughter in words 2) learning more about herself 3) by learning more about Vercueil. While in the first part of this passage, Curren talks about the need to write words to define herself in the mirror of the other, she declares her preference of a world of spoken and body language in the second half of the quote. “In another world” she imagines an actual encounter with her daughter, a scene comparable to the closing scene of the later novel *Disgrace*, in which Coetzee creates just such a scene of visitation between Lurie and Lucy (see 4.1.4).

The letter form and the quoted dialogues with Vercueil present to the reader a continuously shifting point of address, conflating the daughter and Vercueil (both “you”). Though all conversation between Curren and Vercueil is marked as such, the thoughts voiced in the letter to the daughter seem primarily to be directed at Vercueil, at some points it effectively is directed at him without being spoken out loud.

Vercueil serves as an antidote to Curren’s loneliness. Her daughter being far away, she is inclined to find a substitute; by chance this turns out to be Vercueil. The personal motive of Vercueil in choosing her house is revealed late in the narrative – “You didn’t have a dog.” / “Why else?” / “I thought you wouldn’t make trouble.” (184) – and does not preclude

Elizabeth Curren's speculations on the deeper meaning of their encounter. The steadily growing intimacy between Vercueil and Curren corresponds with the growing distance between Curren and her daughter – an emotional distance of estrangement. Vercueil makes the impression of being a neutral bystander to her narrative, but he is essential for Curren's writing, as she once comments: "He, Mr. V., to whom I speak. Speak and then write. Speak in order to write." (83) That the unlikely companions sit "side by side on the sofa" indicates how replacement of the daughter happens not only on an emotional level, it also occurs on the physical level of bodies. As Curren re-imagines stroking her not-yet-awake daughter, she records the sounds sleeping Vercueil makes and links them to her daughter: "[Y]our sleepy, comfortable murmur reborn in the throat of this man." (57) Imagining stroking her daughter, she feels a "current of love" coursing through her hand, as if her imagining had achieved to evoke the "electric being" of her daughter, or at least their how-ever-faint connection.

When contemplating Vercueil's personal hygiene, wondering about her diminishing disgust and her growing affection and attachment, Curren writes: "How easy it is to love a child, how hard to love what a child turns into!" (57) Though she speaks of her daughter, the thought is connected to Vercueil, as she was just at that moment contemplating stroking his hair instead of her daughter's.

**Being like Iron**

When Elizabeth Curren talks to Vercueil about her daughter, she says: "She is like iron." Vercueil replies: "You are like iron too." The narrative voice of Curren continues: "A silence fell between us. Inside me something broke." She repeats this thought out loud to Vercueil: "'Something broke inside me when you said that,' I said, the words just coming." (75) Instead of holding back her hurt feelings, she wants Vercueil to know that his remark hit her to the core.

Within the three-age system of human prehistory the age of iron is the last one before human history proper began. Coetzee transposes this semi-global model of history to the South African context and has Curren write: "Children of iron, I thought. Florence herself, too, not unlike iron. After which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth?" (50) Coetzee inverses Hesiod's progression from dull to shiny metals, with softness as the state to be aspired. Elizabeth Curren embodies this inversion through the softening of her attitude and her perceptions of others.

Later in the narrative, the analogy to stages of civilization is reviewed from a slightly different angle: "Let me tell you, when I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. […] The age of iron waiting to return." (125) The age of iron is associated with the ruthlessness and absence of empathy typical of oppressive systems.

When Vercueil says that she is also "like iron," she if forced to realize how her implicit complicity with apartheid has affected her more than she would like to admit. I read her shock as a moment of insight; what breaks inside her may be her previous self-image. Curren has come to wish to be soft (like clay) and not hard (like iron). In her daughter she expressly misses softness, but the softness she believes to have maintained in spite of apartheid turns out to be a self-coveted illusion, a keeping up of appearances. Coetzee in his 1987 Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech speaks of the "inner deformation," the "stunted souls" of South Africans living under apartheid. (DP 98)

The conversion narrative of Curren tells us how she softens up. This can especially seen in the way she develops a sense for the feelings of her companion:

> Luminous with curiosity, Vercueil followed me into the kitchen and prowled about while I was having breakfast. At last, irritated, unsettled, I burst out: "Would you please leave me alone!" At which he turned away with a look of such childish hurt that I gave his sleeve a tug. "I didn't mean that," I said. (116)

But while the empathetic approximation to Vercueil progresses, the empathetic distance to her daughter increases. The pressing feeling of being estranged from her daughter and the countermovement of feeling closer to Vercueil culminates in Curren's estrangement from even the word "daughter": "Words vomited up from the belly of the whale, misshapen, mysterious. Daughter. […] There is something degrading about the way it all ends – degrading not only to us but to the idea we have of ourselves, of humankind. […] You will not understand this, yet. Vercueil will." (140)

### The Empathetic Unsettlement of Elizabeth Curren

*Age of Iron* illustrates well the empathetic unsettlement felt by Elizabeth Curren and caused by the apartheid environment. Dominic LaCapra, in his study *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), develops this concept in view of Holocaust survivors and the German population after WWII, but his argument can be generalized and applied to all contexts of collectively experienced traumatizing oppression:

> Being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call *empathic unsettlement*, which

> should have stylistic effects or, more broadly, effects in writing which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method. (LaCapra 2001: 41; emphasis added)

What Capra describes here can be easily applied to Elizabeth Curren's realizations in regard to Bheki and John. Curren is careful not to appropriate their experience, instead tries her best to engage with it empathetically. The feeling of something breaking inside could be categorized as a secondary trauma, as Capra explains:

> Such a coming-to-terms [with wounds and scars of the past] would seek knowledge whose truth claims are not one-dimensionally objectifying or narrowly cognitive but involve affect and may empathetically expose the self to an unsettlement, if not a secondary trauma, which should not be glorified or fixated upon but addressed in a manner that strives to be cognitively and ethically responsible as well as open to the challenge of utopian aspiration. Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot feel. (LaCapra 2001: 42)

The complex conflict between disorientation and utopian aspiration is embodied in Elizabeth Curren. Apartheid in its historical manifestation has primarily caused the oppressed non-white population to suffer, but in a secondary degree it has affected all others as well. For Curren, the absence of her daughter has made her a "subject to structural trauma" (LaCapra 2001: 79):

> The traumatizing events in historical trauma can be determined (for example, the events of the Shoah), while structural trauma (like absence) is not an event but an anxiety-producing condition of possibility related to the potential for historical traumatization. (LaCapra 2001: 82)

The anxieties of Elizabeth Curren are played through variously in the course of the narrative. Her attempts to reach out and connect are often frustrated, yet she prods on and does not give up. Again, Capra insightfully supplies a comment to her plight:

> There is, moreover, the ethically induced feeling that one may not be responding with sufficient empathy, a reaction that increases the anxiety one feels both because of the evident, often overwhelming pain of the survivor recalling and even returning to the position of helpless victim and because of one's own helplessness in doing anything about what is being recounted or relived. (LaCapra 2001: 92)

Elizabeth Curren's experience of Bheki's death runs along these lines of anxiety and helplessness. The evening after her trip to Gugulethu she collapses at her kitchen table, crying over the boy's death: "Wherever I turned he was before me, his eyes open in the look of childish puzzlement with which he had met his death." (109) Her grief over the loss of a precious life – "the most generous of all gifts" – leads her to wonder about herself and her social awareness: "Have I ever been fully awake?" (ibid.) Sue Kossew, in her essay "'Women's Words': A Reading of Coetzee's Women Narrators" (Kossew 1998: 166-179), comments on how Curren's "self-loathing is linked with her own identity as a white South African, an identity which she sees as like that of a doll, manipulated by outside forces, without agency, and hollow, lacking substance." (Kossew 1998: 175) Kossew quotes Elizabeth Curren asking herself: "A doll's life? / Is that what I have lived?" (109) The

ruptures in her thoughts and her narrative are stylistic indicators of her empathetic unsettlement:

> I would in general argue that in history there is a crucial role for empathic unsettlement as an aspect of understanding which stylistically upsets the narrative voice and counteracts harmonizing narration or unqualified objectification yet allows for a tense interplay between critical, necessarily objectifying reconstruction and affective response to the voices of victims. (LaCapra 2001: 109)

Likewise, the ambivalence of her relationship with Vercueil, ranging from distaste to close companionship, can be read in the terms of LaCapra's argument:

> I would also note that the response to extreme, traumatizing events or limit cases, notably those involving victimization, tends to be ambivalent and often combines attraction and repulsion. One crucial role of certain moral norms is to help resolve this ambivalence in the direction of empathy with the victim and repulsion toward the perpetrator, including inhibitory repulsion with respect to the tendency toward perpetration or victimization in oneself. (LaCapra 2001: 133)

For Elizabeth Curren the ambivalence of "attraction and repulsion" leads to a more empathetic engagement with others.

### 3.2.9 Trusting the Other and Facing Death

> When would the time come when the jacket fell away and great wings sprouted from his shoulders? (160-161)

Elizabeth Curren writes this as Vercueil carries her away from the underpass to her house, mirroring how Friday once picked up Susan Barton in a "backward embrace" (see 3.1.3). The coincidence of Vercueil's arrival and Curren's diagnosis of cancer likens him to a harbinger of death. In her narrative her imagination of Vercueil oscillates between angel and scavenger: "Not an angel, certainly. An insect, rather, emerging from behind the baseboards when the house is in darkness to forage for crumbs." (14) Curren notes how her impressions of Vercueil are half-perceived and half-created: "I wondered whether you were not, if you will excuse the word, an angel come to show me the way. Of course you were not, you are not, cannot be – I see that. But that is only half the story, isn't it? We half-perceive but we also half-create." (168) As an angel Vercueil serves a dialectical function: Accompanying her to the other side (to eternal sleep) and awakening her sympathetic imagination (inducing empathetic wakefulness). Coetzee playfully aligns her previous complacency with a state of sleep: "The angel goes before, the woman follows. His eyes are open, he sees; hers are shut, she is still sunk in the sleep of worldliness." (168) As if Vercueil were waking her up, confronting her with the nightmare of apartheid.

Just as Elizabeth Curren is forced to face the iron injustices of apartheid, she is also forced to face her own death. In her writing she tackles the task of imagining death, while

simultaneously sensing her own resistance against such imaginings. The contradiction of writing and thinking leads to a bodily moment of objectification under the multiple lenses of a fly settling on Elizabeth Curren's eye:

> Death is the only truth left. Death is what I cannot bear to think. At every moment when I am thinking of something else, I am not thinking death, am not thinking the truth.
> I try to sleep. I empty my mind; calm begins to steal over me. I am falling, I think, I am falling: welcome, sweet sleep.
> Then at the very edge of oblivion something looms up and pulls me back, something whose name can only be *dread*. […] A fly settles on my cheek. It cleans itself. It begins to explore. It walks across my eye, my open eye. I want to blink, I want to wave it away, but I cannot. Through an eye that is and is not mine, I stare at it. It licks itself, if that is the word. There is nothing in those bulging organs that I can recognize as a face. But it is upon me, it is here: it struts across me, a creature from another world. (27; original emphasis)

Curren searches for a face to recognize, but the "creature" offers nothing to mirror her anxiety.[141] The phrase "it is upon me" bears weight and links the fly to death, echoing how Vercueil came to her. A scene one might expect to find in a Bunuel movie, with its extreme close-up on the horror of a fly walking over an open eye. The "eye that is and is not mine" points to a state of self-estrangement, of non-identity, as in death. The first-person perspective invites us to take part, to see for ourselves the fly, the "creature from another world". Could this be the "electric being" of the ultimate otherness, an embodiment of death?

When Elizabeth Curren later takes a drive with Vercueil and contemplates suicide, but keeps being deserted by her "sense of urgency" (119), she imagines the final decision to put an end to life:

> It seems to me that something other than the will must come into play at the last instant, something foreign, something thoughtless, to sweep you over the brink. You have to become someone other than yourself. But who? Who is it that waits for me to step into his shadow? (119)

As in the passage quoted before Curren imagines "being other than oneself", here in relation to death. The exercise of imagining death progresses as Curren and Vercueil undergo a process of empathetic approximation. "Like lovers revisiting the scenes of their first declarations" (118) they take the mountainside drive above Muizenberg, parking at the same spot as before, with a view over False Bay. "If we had a boat you could take me out to sea," (118) she murmurs (to Vercueil) and imagines being set afloat by him and perishing under the "great white wings" of an albatross. Curren immediately returns to her present situation and her plan to immolate herself in front of the parliament, and her "sense of urgency." The

[141] Samantha Vice writes: "While there is nothing in this passage [fly walking over Mrs. Curren's eye] about love, it is an instance of that familiar encounter between the protagonist and the alien Other hat we find in most of Coetzee's novels. The ethical task is to imagine and love these creatures from another world – whether Vercueil's world of sufficiency and terrible innocence or Bheki and John's world of comradeship and narrow courage or, perhaps, even her daughter's safe life in America." (Vice 2010: 308)

conversation continues, Curren verbose as usual, Vercueil interspersing her monologue with short answers, questions and remarks. She reminds him of the story she told about her mother (a night spent underneath an ox wagon), and reveals the special nature of her relationship to Vercueil:

> I have held on to that story all my life. If each of us has a story we tell to ourself about who we are and where we come from, then that is my story. That is the story I choose, or the story that has chosen me. It is there that I come from, it is there that I begin. (120)

She goes on to express her loss of attachment to the country ("the place where I join the world" 121), and to her failing resolve: "I am sitting here next to you and drowning." (122) This picks up the theme of being set afloat in the ocean, tied to a plank of wood. Vercueil pulls out a box of matches and urges her on towards her self-determined and self-willed death, but Curren recoils, seeing in Vercueil madness ("he is cruel, mad, a mad dog" 122). Vercueil, who so far was mostly passive in his dealings with Curren, now seems determined to see her through to the end. He next attempts to douse her with booze ("It's not brandy, it's medicine." 123), and it soon takes its effect: "I swallowed and closed my eyes. Something began to lift inside me: a curtain, a cloud. […] Is this how Vercueil points the way? […] The veil of grayness that had covered everything grew visibly lighter."(123)

She picks up her monologue again and describes to Vercueil how seeing the dead body of Florence's son Bheki has shaken her, how seeing the face of the dead boy has urged her to want to disappear from the face of this country, where she perceives a "gathering feeling of walking upon black faces" (125). But instead of burning herself, she refuses the bottle Vercueil again offers her, attempts to throw it out the window, is stopped by Vercueil, who takes the keys of the car, gets out and throws them into the bushes, leaving her "[b]urning with rage." (126) Another car enters the parking area with loud music blaring. Curren asks the newly-arrived couple to turn down the music, but they desist, instead parking at the other end of the outlet. Then follows an interesting analysis of the face of the woman in the car, who turns to "glare" at Curren:

> Her face was not unattractive yet ugly: closed, bunched, as if afraid that light, air, life itself were going to gather and strike her. Not a face but an expression, yet an expression worn so long as to be hers, her. A thickening of the membrane between the world and the self inside, a thickening become thickness. Evolution, but backward. Fish from the primitive depths (I am sure you know this) grew patches of skin sensitive to the fingerings of lights, patches that in time became eyes. Now, in South Africa, I see eyes clouding over again, scales thickening on them, as the land explorers, the colonist, prepare to return to the deep. (127)

All this from one fleeting look at a face. Followed at first by a reflection on escaping South Africa by leaving it behind: "Should I have come when you invited me?" (127) In the first instance, this seems to point to Vercueil's invitation to her own death, but in the following the

reader is reminded that this "you" is her daughter, whom she addresses in this letter; yet another instance where Vercueil and the daughter blur into each other in a synonymous "you". In the next thought, Curren reflects on how much she might be similar to the woman whose face she just described, and enters a short act of perspective-taking: "That woman in the car: perhaps, as they drove off, she was saying to her companion: 'What a sour old creature! What a closed-off face!'" (128-129)

This passage has been quoted at length to show how Coetzee manages to conflate a variety of perspectives in the voice of Elizabeth Curren; starting with her own perspective, she shifts to the daughter (and via her also to Vercueil), then to the woman (who to the reader is not more than a face) and finally back to herself. For the reader this offers a richness and depth of perception in regard to her position in her own narrative. This variety of perspectives enhances our understanding of her situation, of her emotional state, which allows us to move from sympathy (not far from pity) to empathy, allows us to better understand Elizabeth Curren and what she is going through. Hearing (reading) only her voice would not give us this insight, but instead would prompt us to remain merely sympathetic, if not even to only feel pity for this aging woman and her late remorse.

### 3.2.10 Companionship Transformed – Dog Bodies and A Deadly Embrace

> I may seem to understand what I say, but, believe me, I do not. From the beginning, when I found him behind the garage in his cardboard house, sleeping, waiting, I have understood nothing. I am feeling my way along a passage that grows darker all the time. I am feeling my way toward you; with each word I feel my way. (131)

Elizabeth Curren embraces the contradictions of her own thinking, which at times assumes a position of knowing (in accordance with her teaching vocation), then again falters in the face of apparently incomprehensible otherness, which ranges from Vercueil over Bheki and John to her estranged daughter. The "you" takes on a dimension surpassing her daughter, pointing to the ultimate otherness of death itself. In *The Master of Petersburg* Dostoevsky will be going through similar notions of drowning and reaching out to his dead son Pavel, who like Elizabeth Curren's daughter comes to represents otherness.

In the final sections of *Age of Iron* the relationship between Curren and Vercueil reaches a stage where contradictions become tolerable: "Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him." (130) This echoes her statement about her love for Bheki's friend, John, and indicates her effort to struggle on, to preserve her soul in spite of her imminent death: "I am trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul." (130) The complexity of their riddled companionship remains and is not smoothed over into terms of simple friendship: "I

give my life to Vercueil to carry over. I trust Vercueil because I do not trust Vercueil. I love him because I do not love him. Because he is the weak reed I lean upon him." (131) Elizabeth Curren is forced to admit that her supposed acts of kindness can hardly be seen as such by Vercueil, since they are tainted by a history of segregation which cannot be undone: "What I give he does not forgive me for giving. No charity in him, no forgiveness. (*Charity?* says Vercueil. *Forgiveness?*) Without his forgiveness I give without charity, serve without love. Rain falling on barren soil." (131; original emphasis) Note how the bracket offers the reader a response of Vercueil as imagined by Curren. In the concluding metaphor she is the "rain", he the "barren soil" (her fertility is affirmed by having a daughter, his barrenness by his childlessness). In a different spirit, the fertility metaphor might suggest that she and Vercueil could bear a child together, that she might give him a child in a final act of charity, however ill-received. This idea is taken up in her following thoughts, but immediately rejected and shifted to the terms of her own life and death:

> When I was younger I might have given myself to him bodily. That is the sort of thing one does, one did, however mistakenly. Now I put my life in his hands instead. This is my life, these words, these tracings of the movements of crabbed digits over the page. These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on. Once upon a time you lived in me as once upon a time I lived in my mother; as she still lives in me, as I grow toward her, may I live in you. (131)

Elizabeth Curren turns herself into a paper being – shortly before she described the dead bodies of white people as "papery" (124), wherefore they burn well – in this letter to her daughter. She hopes the words will enter her daughter and live on in her; but on the level of the text (and beyond), Curren will live on in the minds of the readers of Coetzee's novel.

Elizabeth Curren's death is approaching at an increasing pace, one indicator being her telephone conversation with the pharmacist, whom she asks for the strongest pain killer ("the last one prescribed" 184). Vercueil offers his help and closes his hands around her neck, but Elizabeth Curren whispers a simple "Don't" (185), instead taking his hands and beating them on her chest "in a gesture of lamentation quite foreign to [her]." (185) She asks for the company of Vercueil's dog in her bed ("For the warmth."), and when Vercueil points out that the dog won't stay, she invites him as well.

> He lay down at my back, on top of the bedclothes. The smell of his dirty feet reached me. He whistled softly; the dog leapt up, did its circle dance, settled between his legs and mine. Like Tristan's sword, keeping us honest. (185)

How far their unlikely companionship has taken them! Ultimately, the approximation of their bodies has now come as far as possible under the circumstances (and further, if we consider Curren's earlier musings about their conjugation). The bodies form the basis for enhancing their empathetic approximation, the condition *sine qua non*, even if Curren proposes a

contrary thought: “This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses.” (186) By now Curren has firmly established that her soul has just lately begun to rise from the ashes of a life spent in forgetful blindness: “Vercueil and his dog, sleeping so calmly beside these torments of grief. Fulfilling their charge, waiting for the soul to emerge. The soul, neophyte, wet, blind, ignorant.” (186) In a way quite similar to the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Elizabeth Curren has undergone a transformation, both in the dying body and the reborn soul.

In the final sections of the narrative (which has no distinct sections, unless one takes free spaces of two lines to mark sections) a last return to the mundane takes place: “Every day he goes off to do the shopping. In the evening he cooks, then hovers over me, watching to see that I eat.” (189) They talk about how Vercueil “lost the use of his fingers” in an accident at sea, where “his hand was caught in a pulley and crushed” (189) – comparable to David’s finger being crushed in *Boyhood*. Illustrating their intimacy, Curren shows no hesitation when she pinches his ring finger lightly to test whether he feels anything (in his finger), but the “nerves are dead.” (187) Their intimacy now seems permanent, and also seems to have extended beyond their bodies, even if these remain the primary site of display for this intimacy:

> We share a bed, folded one upon the other like a page folded in two, like two wings folded: old mates, bunkmates, conjoined, conjugal. […] A dry creature, a creature of air, like those locust fairies in Shakespeare with their whipstock of cricket’s bone, lash of spider film. (189)

Elizabeth Curren in passing becomes aware of how awkward the impression on her daughter must be:

> From the side of her shadow husband your mother writes. Forgive me if the picture offends you. One must love what is nearest. One must love what is at hand, as a dog loves.
>
> Mrs V. (190)

This is followed by the last spacing of two lines, as if to mark the end of the letter with a strange signature signalling her allegiance to her “shadow husband” Vercueil, as if finally marking the distance to her daughter, as if completing the estrangement, granting Vercueil precedence over her daughter: “In this respect she relinquishes, at last, the sovereignty of the monologic ‘I’ that dominates the text; she overcomes her will to live and gives her life, literally, into Vercueil’s hands – just as Coetzee, figuratively, relinquishes authority over his text in giving it to his reader.” (Worthington 2011: 126)

By closing the letter formally, the very last section assumes the status of not being part of the letter anymore, but more an epilogue telling of her final departure. This is echoed by

the dates given at the very end of the novel in cursive writing: "*1986-89*." (198) Since the events described in the letter could hardly encompass a time of three years, it points to the time it took the author Coetzee to write this book containing Elizabeth Curren's narrative/letter. However, it continues as first person narrative, thereby approximating the position of character and author.

The release comes in the final paragraph. Elizabeth Curren's death coincides with the end of the narrative, but at the same time its announcement has marked its beginning, making death (by cancer) the alpha and omega of her narrative. That Elizabeth Curren has the presence to narrate her moment of death in the first person emphasizes the artfulness and fictionality of the narrative, and like a death aria in the opera her final words constitute a prolonged moment as she is poised on the brink of death. In the very last paragraph, Elizabeth Curren notes how she does not smell Vercueil anymore; and surely his bodily odours have not vanished, but rather her distaste and heightened awareness of it has diminished to nothing. The paragraph also offers two common death tropes, "tunnel" and "curtains parted," presented in very literal terms:

> I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had.
>
> *1986-89* (AI 198)

The final embrace of Vercueil offers only the comfort of death and painlessness. Her unlikely companion, who remains with her in her final moments, who has listened to her long discourses on shame and love, has helped her soul bloom for a last time. For the most part he remained passive, active only in his resistance to submitting himself to her completely. In this last paragraph his final action is an embrace, from which "there was no warmth to be had."

It is of little importance whether Vercueil delivers her letter, since the daughter is merely a point of address in this narrative, but never fleshed into a character. We as readers have received it, and Vercueil has played his role in delivering its message to us. We as readers have followed Elizabeth Curren on her journey from quiet repulsion by to an acknowledgement of injustice, have seen the horrors of death through her eyes. We have accompanied her and Vercueil in their beautiful, if somewhat melancholic *pas de deux*, moving back and forth while the distance between them got less and less, until it ultimately vanished in a final embrace.

## 3.3 *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) – Fathers and Sons

*Confession is everywhere in Dostoevsky. (*Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* 1992: 275*)*

Whereas Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* was facing her own death and addressing her emigrated daughter, we now encounter Dostoevsky as aging parent facing the grief over the death of his stepson Pavel in *The Master of Petersburg*. The personal tone adopted in the previous narrative is continued, only now in the third person past tense and removed in time to Russia at the end of the 19th century. *Age of Iron* was synchronous with the time of its production, the late 1980s, and set at the site of its production, Cape Town, South Africa. The setting of *The Master of Petersburg* has been related to Coetzee's own biography in terms of living in an interregnum.[142] The central theme of grief over a lost son clearly reflects Coetzee's loss of his son Nicholas in 1989. Coetzee uses the medium of fiction to explore his very personal act of mourning.[143] The sympathetic imagination of the author Coetzee allows him not only to send Dostoevsky through the streets of Petersburg in the search for traces of dead Pavel, but also to reflect on the position of the writer and his inspiration, on his source material and the ethical responsibilities this might entail.

In *The Master of Petersburg* the patterns of empathy are primarily evoked by the presentation of the main character himself, but also in his relations to others, most notably in his relation to his stepson. In regard to source material and a writer's responsibilities, Dostoevsky's relation to Matryona and her mother Anna Sergeyevna illustrate how the imagination can lead a writer to dark places, even while affected by processes of empathy. As readers we witness the theme of one of Dostoevsky's five major novels, namely *The Possessed*, emerging in the writer's imagination (related to us by Coetzee's narrative). Mirroring the confession of Stavrogin about his seduction of a young girl and her subsequent suicide, Dostoevsky's involvement with his landlady and her daughter takes a similar direction, only without the fatal outcome of *The Possessed*.[144]

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[142] Mike Marais observes:

> Both [novels, i.e. AI and MOP] depict societies which, temporally, find themselves in the interregnum between a decaying, old political order and a new one seeking to establish itself. In each novel, a protagonist who embodies the values of western society confronts revolutionary nihilists who challenge his/her ethical assumptions. In the conflictual relationship which then develops, each protagonist condemns his/her antagonist's nihilism in ethical terms. Finally, the protagonists of both novels embark on literary exercises which reflect the assumptions that underpin their relationships with the nihilists. (Marais 1998b: 230)

[143] For a more comprehensive assessment see Durrant 2004: 23-52.

[144] For a more detailed discussion of *The Possessed* as intertext see Adelman 2000.

We closely follow the main character as sole focalizer of the unfolding events. The "I" of Elizabeth Curren's narrative now becomes the "He" of Dostoevsky's narrative, told not by himself but by a neutral heterodiegetic narrator. The reader is no longer invited to inhabit the main character's perspective; instead he takes on the role of an observer. In Breithaupt's model of narrative empathy this allows for a distance that potentially enhances the narrative/cognitive empathy of the reader for the main character. On the other hand it makes the narrative at first seem less emotionally invested, an impression that is soon corrected by the transparent intimacy of Dostoevsky's thoughts and feelings.

### 3.3.1 Exposition: The Father, the Son, and the Suit

Coetzee establishes the "He" of the narrative with great care, the name of the main character being revealed only later in the narrative. After establishing the scene, Petersburg in October 1869, we first encounter the protagonist:

> The passenger steps out. He is a man in late middle age, bearded and stooped, with a high forehead and heavy eyebrows that lend him an air of sober self-absorption. He wears a dark suit of somewhat démodé cut. (MOP 1)[145]

This can hardly be called an embodied character, rather resembling a brief sketch of the man we are to follow on his odyssey through Petersburg in search of an answer to the death of his stepson Pavel. The "air of sober self-absorption" befits the writer (as it would Coetzee); the old-fashioned "dark suit" sets up a contrast to the white suit of Pavel, which acquires symbolic importance in the course of the narrative.[146] His first steps lead him to the former dwelling of his son, where he meets Matryona (whose name is revealed early on), "a girl with fair hair and striking dark eyes" (2), who leads him upstairs to the lodgings of her mother Anna Sergeyevna Kolenkina (her full name is given), who has "the same dark eyes and sculpted eyebrows as the child, but her hair is black" (2). These observations are made in the vein of an external observer; no eye contact is made (or at least not reported). Coetzee continues to keep the reader in the dark about the protagonist's name, even when he introduces himself: "'Forgive me for coming unannounced,' he says. 'My name…' He hesitates. 'I believe my son has been a lodger of yours.'" (2) Dostoevsky presents himself in his function as "the father of," omitting his own name. Only much later will his actual name be revealed to the reader by councillor Maximov. (33) Showing the mother and the girl a

[145] Coetzee 1999 [1994]. All quotes in section 3.3 will be from MOP unless indicated otherwise.
[146] The dark suit of the father and the white suit of the son could be connected to Plato's theory of the passions: the white horse representing the rational and moral instincts, the dark horse representing irrational instincts, i.e. dark desires (Phaedrus 246e-254e, in Plato 1925).

daguerreotype of the son, the child whispers his name: Pavel Alexandrovich; almost as if she was calling out to the dead Pavel in an orphic gesture of resurrection. Pavel constitutes the epicentre of this narrative, and all events unfold around his unsolved death by falling from a shot tower.[147] Dostoevsky suspects murder and follows a trail to the revolutionary and nihilist Nechaev, modelled after a historical figure (who the historical Dostoevsky never met).[148]

Left alone in the room formerly occupied by his son, he first tries to catch a scent of his son from the pillow, "but he can smell nothing but soap and sun." (3) He attempts to evoke the physical presence of the son. He opens the son's suitcase, that is among the few things remaining of him, to find a white cotton suit, to which he presses his forehead (where his mirror neurons are located): "Faintly the smell of his son comes to him. He breathes in deeply, again and again, thinking: his ghost, entering me." (3f) We as readers stand by to witness the father employing his sympathetic imagination to call forth the spirit of his dead son, here represented by the embodied expression of a "faint smell" – imagine mirror neurons firing away after being activated by a smell that triggers a neurological representation (spirit image) of the son.

Pavel represents the other Dostoevsky is trying to approximate, is trying to connect to. The text continuously evokes Pavel's presence in the mind of the aging author, gyrates around his repeated attempts to reach out beyond death to his lost son. Dostoevsky waits "for the darkness to thicken, to turn into another kind of darkness, a darkness of presence. Silently he forms his lips over his son's name, three times, four times." (5) Unlike Orpheus, of whose journey into the realm of death he is reminded, he has no music to appease the spirits, but only words, boiling down to the calling of his dead son's name: Pavel. At this moment "[h]is head begins to swim" (5) and he falls asleep, imagining "himself plunging down a long waterfall into a pool, and gives himself over to the plunge." (6) With these words the first chapter, simply titled "Petersburg," ends.[149]

[147] A "shot tower" was used to make ammunition. Herein lies the probably most suggestive parallel to the death of Coetzee's son Nicholas, who fell from a balcony; Coetzee's grief remains his own, but the dimension it takes on in his fiction about the Russian writer is made available to the reader and thereby transcends the private, as expressed by Dostoevsky to councillor Maximov: "A private matter, an utterly private matter, private to the writer, till it is given to the world." (40) For a highly original discussion see Lawlan 1998.

[148] In an interview with Joanna Scott, Coetzee sublimely comments: "The death of Pavel brings Dostoevsky face to face with Nechaev, which is something that didn't happen in real life, so to that extent it allows me to engineer a meeting between two very important historical figures." (Scott 1997: 100)

[149] This is the first novel where Coetzee uses titled chapters, maybe as a homily to the author Dostoevsky. The formal use of chapter titles otherwise recurs only in the essay fiction *Elizabeth Costello*.

### 3.3.2 Diving into Grief

As in the final section of *Foe*, when the narrative dives into the wreck of history and loses its voice, the theme of losing oneself recurs in *The Master of Petersburg* in the form of epileptic attacks. The "head beginning to swim" could be an auratic indicator for a seizure, but at this point only leads to the forgetfulness of sleep. The theme of "losing himself" is explicitly expressed in the narrative early on: "[…] breathing softly, trying to lose himself, trying to evoke a spirit that can surely not yet have left these surroundings." (12) The loss of self is supposed to make room for the spirit of the dead son to take residence.

Another theme that resonates with the final section of *Foe*, in particular the notion of diving into deep waters, recurs prominently in *The Master of Petersburg*, as in one of Dostoevsky's dream visions:

> He knows what he is in search of. As he swims he sometimes opens his mouth and gives what he thinks of as a cry or a call. With each cry or call water enters his mouth; each syllable is replaced by a syllable of water. He grows more and more ponderous, till his breastbone is brushing the silt of the river-bed. (17)

The syllables being replaced by water are simply the name of his son: Pavel. As with Vercueil and with Friday, Pavel represents an other we learn very little about. In terms of the sympathetic imagination, leaving the other as a fairly blank space challenges the reader far more, even though it implies repeated frustration. In the end, this opens space for our sympathetic imagination to explore, and thereby allows us to practice our faculty of empathy, and there is no need to come to a final conclusion in regard to the other. Sam Durrant comments on the difference between what Elizabeth Costello preaches and what many characters in Coetzee's fictions go through:

> Costello's lecture preaches the necessity of awakening to the reality of other lives, a passage from willed ignorance to willed wakefulness that only comes about through an act of volition, a conscious decision to open the heart. Coetzee's novels, by contrast, describe a kind of fall into sleepfulness, a cessation of the will that leads to a dreamy or somnambulistic mode of attentiveness to other lives. And yet these trajectories may not be as far apart as they may appear. (Durrant 2006: 121f)

Whereas Elizabeth Curren actively sought to reshape her imagination, Dostoevsky's opening up to the other takes place subconsciously.

In the case of Dostoevsky, the impossibility of closure in regard to his lost son becomes apparent in his thoughts, related to us in indirect discourse: "From somewhere to somewhere I am in retreat, he thinks; when the retreat is completed, what will be left of me?" (19) At this point Dostoevsky has not yet realized the futility of his work of mourning, of his work of losing himself. In the end he will remain himself more than he wishes to, and his self

will be the inescapable Rubicon of his existence; the only way forward will be the words he writes on paper. But even at the early stages of his search, the metaphor of submerging himself into a realm of water points to this futility: "The stream that carries him still moves forward; but that purpose is no longer life. He is being carried by dead water, a dead stream." (20) Later, it will come to him in more precise terms: "I am I, he thinks despairingly, manacled to myself till the day I die. Whatever it was that wavered toward me, I was unworthy of it, and now it has withdrawn." (82)

Dostoevsky puts up resistance to the death he encounters again and again: "All day and all night he breathes life into the water." (21) Only his thoughts can animate the waters, only the vision of a writer's mind. The character is aware of his bookishness (a term also attributed to Coetzee by Coetzee in *Summertime*): "He tries to speak, but his voice emerges strangled. I am behaving like a character in a book, he thinks." (27) We read "the strangled voice" of the grieving father, who is lacking the right words to conjure his son back to life. All relations he forms are connected to Pavel: Pavel's landlady and her daughter; Councillor Maximov, who is in possession of Pavel's private papers; Nechaev, a revolutionary comrade or possibly his murderer; finally Ivan and the dog, intermediaries of a third kind, empathetic foils for Dostoevsky. Through all of them he hopes to reconnect to his lost son.

In the case of Anna Sergeyevna, he longs for her to understand his soul-searching, hopes that together they might be able to hear Pavel's voice:

> How can he make her understand? To make her understand he would have to speak in a voice from under the waters, a boy's clear bell-voice pleading out of the deep dark. "Sing to me, dear father!" the voice would have to call, and she would have to hear. Somewhere within himself he would have to find not only that voice but the words, the true words. Here and now he does not have the words. (110f)

He continues this thought and muses about whether these orphic "words" might not be found "in the breast of the Russian people [...]. Or perhaps in the breast of a child." (111) This foreshadows the function Matryona will take as a character in Dostoevsky's next novel, the child who loses her heart and life to Stavrogin. The lost child thereby appears threefold, once as Pavel, twice as Matryona – Coetzee's character and Dostoevsky's character. The author figure Dostoevsky struggles to maintain what he calls "the integrity of his grieving":

> He shakes his head as if to rid it of a plague of devils. What is it that is corrupting the integrity of his grieving, that insists it is nothing but a lugubrious disguise? Somewhere inside him truth has lost its way. As if in the labyrinth of his brain, but also in the labyrinth of his body – veins, bones, intestines, organs – a tiny child is wandering, searching for the light, searching to emerge. How can he find the child lost within himself, allow him a voice to sing his sad song?
> *Piping on a bone.* […] *Father, why have you left me in the dark forest? Father, when will you come and save me?* (125f; original italics)

The orphic, here paired with biblical undertones (Jesus in the Garden Gethsemane, Luke 22:39-46; Matthew 26:36-46), is imagined both as father's duty and as child's plea for help. Dostoevsky is determined to rescue what is left of Pavel's spirit, to spare Matryona from ignominy and to relegate the imagined atrocity into his realm of fiction, where a child will be sacrificed to make a point about the elusiveness of salvation. Dostoevsky turns Pavel into the fictional Stavrogin, who remains in the care of the author figure Dostoevsky, miraculously extending his fatherhood. How much he cares for the stepson finds its expression in extending his lifeline by implanting his spirit in his forthcoming fiction. Dostoevsky imagines how dead Pavel feels and explains to Anna Sergeyevna: "[...]Pavel is above all lonely, and in his loneliness needs to be sung to and comforted, to be reassured that he will not be abandoned at the bottom of the waters." (111) Instead of abandoning him, he chooses to betray him in an act of love and art.

Early on Dostoevsky hints at the dark ambiguity of his undertaking, for instance when he wears Pavel's white suit:

> He opens Pavel's suitcase and dons the white suit. Hitherto he has worn it as a gesture to the dead boy, a gesture of defiance and love. But now, looking in the mirror, he sees only a seedy imposture and, beyond that, something surreptitious and obscene, something that belongs behind the locked doors and curtained windows of rooms where men in wigs and skirts bare their rumps to be flogged. (71)

The early "I" of Dostoevsky believed his bond to Pavel to be uncorrupted and pure, but as he moves from "I" to "He" his former beliefs are contested and doubt seeps in. The white suit can no longer satisfy his hunger for consolation and salvation, the rational enquiries will not deliver what he was hoping for; instead the search for the truth about his son's death turns into a self-scrutiny, turns to his darker passions and liberates them, both in his emotional dealings with his landlady and her daughter and his artistic aspirations, which he comes to discuss with Maximov and Nechaev in regard to their political implications and with himself in regard to their moral implications.

### 3.3.3 Seizures of the Self; From I to He

The descent into deep waters collates the ancient myth of Orpheus with the more psychological theme of descending into a subliminal range of the unconscious. Diving into the deep corresponds with the descent into the underworld, the world of the dead – as in the final section of *Foe*. The repeated use of aquatic metaphors corresponds with the theme of leaving behind the self. On the narrative level of the text, the "I" transforms into a "He"; this

happens literally when we change from reported dialogue and indirect thought back to the third person narrative, but it is also reflected on by Dostoevsky on the level of the story.

His dreams and visions are another vehicle of insight, both producing in him states beyond his conscious control:

> Visions that come and go, swift, ephemeral. He is not in control of himself. Carefully he pushes paper and pen to the far end of the table and lays his head on his hands. If I am going to faint, he thinks, let me faint at my post. (53)

The fainting anticipates an epileptic seizure, which he suffers in varying intensity; this time he hopes to remain "at [his] post." The seizures represent states in which he loses control, but without anything memorable taking place in his brain; a blanking out rather than an opening of secret channels. At the same time it indicates a loss of embodied substance and of identity:

> When he wakes it is into darkness so dense that he can feel it pressing upon his eyeballs. He has no idea where he is, no idea who he is. He is a wakefulness, a consciousness, that is all. It is as if he has been born a minute ago, born into a world of unrelieved night. (69, after first fit)

The inner turmoil is paralleled by bodily discomforts that either accompany his seizures or come involuntarily:

> He lies down, pressing an arm across his eyes as if to ward off a blow. Everything spins; he has the sensation of falling into endless blackness. When he comes back he has again lost all sense of who he is. He knows the word *I*, but as he stares at it it becomes as enigmatic as a rock in the middle of a desert.
> Just a dream, he thinks; at any moment I will awake and all will be well again. For an - instant he is allowed to believe. Then the truth bursts over him and overwhelms him. (71)

The symbolic "I" as a "rock in the middle of the desert" brings to memory the figures of Jacobus Coetzee, Magda, Michael K, the Magistrate, Eugene Dawn and even Elizabeth Curren. All of these characters share the notion of a dominant "I" they either wish to ascertain (Jacobus and Eugene), or have serious doubts about (Magda), or wish to transcend by either a return to a state of nature (Michael K) or a rebirth of the soul (Magistrate, Elizabeth Curren, Dostoevsky).The reunion with nature and the symbolic rebirth are paralleled by the narrative shift from "I" to "He". *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg* are all third person narratives, in which the shift from "I" to "He" is already formally implicated by them being third person narratives. The characters struggle to overcome the enigmatic nature of their selves (as the first person narrators Eugene and Jacobus failed to do) and reach an enlightened third person position in regard to themselves as well as to make room for the other to inhabit their imagination. In a first step they employ their sympathetic imagination (sometimes more, sometimes less sympathetic to others), in a second step their empathy is aroused, ultimately enabling them to no longer be a

rock in a desert but rather a corn of sand and therefore a complementary part of a desert rather than standing out in a solitary fashion.

Dostoevsky senses the result of his investigations, based on reason, will be limited. Almost like a detective in a crime story he tries to reconstruct events, talk to witnesses and people who knew Pavel.[150] But this rational approach is sidelined by his inner journey, for which the acquaintances he makes are the catalysts. The following quote illustrates the conflict between his rationalizations and his convictions regarding the soul:

> If he expects his son to speak in the voice of the unexpected, he will never hear him. As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will come. Therefore – paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness – he must answer to what he does not expect. (80)

Therefore Dostoevsky comes to believe that he must empty himself of pre-formulated expectations, which are part and parcel of the rational "I", and achieve a state of mind in which he can respond to what he does not and cannot expect. What is needed is a mode of attentiveness beyond observation, an opening of the self to the other. The rational mind allows him to express his thoughts, whereas the language of the heart operates beyond a writer's words: "It is as though a fog has settled over his brain. If he were a character in a book, what would he say, at a moment like this when either the heart speaks or the page remains blank?" (97) Not only does reclaiming Pavel require moving beyond reason, but his own salvation does heavily depend on it: "[H]e knows too that as long as he tries by cunning to distinguish things that are things from things that are signs he will not be saved. (83)

Towards the middle of the novel, in the central chapter "The shot tower," Dostoevsky learns from Anna Sergeyevna that the police are investigating a murder that took place in the vicinity. The beggar Ivanov, whom Dostoevsky had taken in the night before, has been found dead in an alley.[151] Not having heard the end of the news, Dostoevsky reacts with shock to the police investigation: "Time stops; he stands frozen. 'Why should they come here?' The words come from him but he seems to hear them from afar, the thin words of someone else." (109) These thin words indicate what it might mean to speak in the voice of another, a "He" residing within the "I"; a state of self-estrangement that opens avenues to the other.

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[150] "Behind the metafictional vexation games, the blending of factual biography, the rewriting of a classic and the revision of revision, which will supply work for generations of interpreters, a double detective story. It tries on the one hand to solve the mysterious death of Pavel Alexandrovich Isaev, keeping the reader on his toes, on the other hand a far greater mystery is explored and spied out, namely the riddle of how not this or that novel, but how masterworks in general come into existence." (Horstmann 2005: 125; my translation)

[151] This corresponds with historical events. The revolutionary Nechaev had sacrificed one of theirs, namely Ivanov.

Finally, the seizures take on a new quality for Dostoevsky. Instead of treating them as phenomena of the pathological order, he now sees them in the light of his spiritual debasement. Whereas the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* was actively seeking a restoration of his soul, Dostoevsky comes to realize the twisted turns his soul has taken, fuelling his imagination and enabling him to create powerful works of art. He gains a new perspective on himself, an effect that even applies to his seizures:

> It is as though for the first time his eyes have been open to where he is when he is seized. In fact, he must wonder whether *seizure* is any longer the right word, whether the word has not all along been *possession* – whether everything that for the past twenty years has gone under the name of seizure has not been a mere presentiment of what is now happening, the quaking and dancing of the body a long-drawn-out prelude to a quaking of the soul.
> The death of innocence. […] darkness multiplies, fold upon fold. (213)

The "quaking of the soul" was initiated by his search for his dead stepson's spirit, but he was prepared for it by his history of epileptic fits. The notions he is forced to face regarding both Pavel and himself prove him guilty, but only in the last chapter of the novel will he reveal the nature of his transgression. For now, let the following quote foreshadow part of his final insight:

> The madness is in him and he is in the madness; they think each other; what they call each other, whether madness or epilepsy or vengeance or the spirit of the age, is of no consequence. This is not a lodging-house of madness in which he is living, nor is Petersburg a city of madness. He is the mad one; and the one who admits he is the mad one is mad too. Nothing he says is true, nothing is false, nothing is to be trusted, nothing to be dismissed. There is nothing to hold to, nothing to do but fall. (235)[152]

### 3.3.4 Imagining Death

The chapter "The shot tower" forms the epicentre of the narrative. The father visits the place of his son's death. Together with Nechaev he climbs up the shot tower and is lead to the very railing over which Pavel fell. Dostoevsky faces the death of his son in a very literal way:

> A metaphor, he tells himself, that is all it is – another word for a lapse of consciousness, a not-being-here, an absence. Nothing new. The epileptic knows it all: the approach to the edge, the glance downward, the lurch of the soul, the thinking that thinks itself crazily over and over like a bell pealing in the head: *Time shall have an end, there shall be no death*.
> He grips the rail tighter, shakes his head to chase away the dizziness. Metaphors – what nonsense! There is death, only death. Death is a metaphor for nothing. Death is death. (118; original italics)

The metaphor is an instrument of comparing the unlikely, of establishing unusual connections between disparate matters. Dostoevsky dismisses metaphors as "nonsense" in the face of his son's death, but at the same time his quest for his deceased son proceeds in a metaphorical fashion, various terms and people serving as intermediates between himself and his dead son.

[152] This once again resonates with Coetzee's essay about Erasmus (GO 83-103).

Nechaev explains to him that the police might have made Pavel drunk and led him up here; at the same time Dostoevsky suspects Nechaev of having sacrificed Pavel. At this moment we witness the struggle between the knowledge imparted to him by his epileptic fits and his literary intellect, searching for an expression of his sentiments.

> *Believe*: another word. What does it mean, to believe? I believe in the body on the pavement below. I believe in the blood and the bones. To gather up the broken body and embrace it: that is what it means to believe. To believe and to love – the same thing.
> "I believe in the resurrection," he says. The words come without premeditation. The crazy, ranting tone is gone from his voice. Speaking the words, hearing them, he feels a quick joy, not so much at the words themselves as at the way they have come, spoken out of him as if by another. *Pavel!* he thinks.
> […]
> "I believe in the resurrection of the body and in life eternal." (122)

Believing is connected to the embodied experience of death and of love, epitomized in the father's imagined embrace of the dead body. The conflict between thinking and feeling is not resolved, but at least made productive through the sympathetic imagination being directed towards re-imagining his son's death. Dostoevsky recovers some faith in his assertion (or assumption) of the religious doctrine of resurrection, the last resort for comfort in the face of a loved one's death. The faith in resurrection is expressed "as if by another." Through this process of sympathetic imagination he takes the place of Pavel and lets the son take his place: "I am the one who died and was buried, he thinks, Pavel the one who lives and will always live. What I am struggling to do now is to understand what form this is in which I have returned from the grave." (124) Taking Pavel's place is something Dostoevsky already imagined early on in the novel:

> At moments like this he cannot distinguish Pavel from himself. They are the same person; and that person is no more or less than a thought, Pavel thinking it in him, he thinking it in Pavel. The thought keeps Pavel alive, suspended in his fall. (21)

Pavel lives on in Dostoevsky's imagination, but his embodied self is lost and only vaguely present in the father, "faded copy of the son." (67) The writer longs for more, cannot give up his search for a more satisfying resolution:

> Why this plodding chase across empty country after the rumour of a ghost, the ghost of a rumour?
> Because I am he. Because he is I. Something there that I seek to grasp: the moment before extinction when the blood still courses, the heart still beats. (53)

This thought was previously expressed by Elizabeth Curren when she ponders on why she feels urged to love Bheki's friend John (see 3.2.7).

Towards the close of the novel, the eyes of the child Matryona tell us how much Dostoevsky's transformation has achieved, how successful his assimilation to Pavel has become, how close he got to resurrecting his lost son: "'Pavel used to sit like that when he

was writing,' she says. 'I thought you were Pavel when I came in.'" (246) However, it is impossible for dead Pavel to take permanent residence in the writer, and vice versa. Dostoevsky early on characterizes himself as "the most transient of sojourners" (66), and as the narrative progresses we see how this applies both to his detective work and the encounters involved, as well as to his soul-searching in regard to Pavel. The shifting between "I" and "He", formally a permanent feature of the narrative, can only be momentary; but these moments constitute stepping stones for his inner journey:

> He knows what he is doing. At the same time, in this contest of cunning between himself and God, he is outside himself, perhaps outside his soul. Somewhere he stands and watches while he and God circle each other. And time stands still and watches too. Time is suspended, everything is suspended before the fall.
> *I have lost my place in my soul*, he thinks. (249; original italics)

Suspending his position of a narrative "He" through quoted thoughts comes at the price of losing his sense of self, or, as expressed here, losing his place in his soul. Ultimately, what seems to be a loss proves to be a gain, although not without a price to pay. And his ability to enter alternative states of mind has increased the scope and pace of his inner movements, as when he imagines wanting to kiss Pavel after his return to life: "As he speaks the words he hears how mad they are. He seems to move into and out of madness like a fly at an open window." (140)

If we as readers at first imagined Dostoevsky as identifying himself with Orpheus, attempting to resurrect Pavel (read: Eurydice) from the dead, we are now confounded by a repeated reversal of the roles. Coetzee does not allow us the comfort of a smug allegorical relation, but instead lets the image flicker and invert its chromatics. Pavel is "piping on a bone" to his father from the depths, taking the place of the singer Orpheus instead of being the muse Eurydice. Dostoevsky also taps into the ending of the myth of Orpheus, who is torn to pieces by the Maenads after returning from Tartarus without his beloved. Just after contemplating his "power to write" (152), he turns his mind to memories of Pavel that haunt him while he wanders through the city of Petersburg. These memories are now equated with the scattered body parts of Orpheus, while at the same time Dostoevsky likens his poetic powers to those of Orpheus. Both father and (step-)son are related to Orpheus, while Eurydice remains outside of the picture:

> Nowhere and everywhere, torn and scattered like Orpheus. […]
> The task left to me: to gather the hoard, put together the scattered parts. Poet, lyre-player, enchanter, lord of resurrection, that is what I am called to be. And the truth? Stiff shoulders

> humped over the writing-table, and the ache of a heart slow to move. A tortoise heart. (152f)[153]

From the myth his thoughts move to the everyday toil of the writer, commenting on the slowness of the writing process in bringing about movements of the sentiments, of the heart. The "tortoise heart" might be taken for a central metaphor of Dostoevsky's slow inner journey from searching for a lost son to finding a new theme for the next novel; in both cases resulting in the realization of what price he is paying for his artistic endeavours. In this sense we can take another thought from the final chapter to indicate the two-fold nature of his grief over the lost son: "A corpse improperly buried; buried now within him, in his breast, no longer weeping but hissing madness, whispering to him to fall." (234)

### 3.3.5 Anna and Matryona – Unlimited Delimitation?

Anna Sergeyevna comes close to being an amanuensis for the writer Dostoevsky (as his wife Anya – both in the novel and historically – was to him; in name reappearing as secretary of Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year*). While Dostoevsky's dealings with Maximov and Nechaev offer a site of political negotiation in regard to the responsibility of a writer, Anna and Matryona offer a site for a more personal exchange.

The conversations between her and Dostoevsky are of a more intimate nature, and not only because they end up making love. The act of love-making brings him one step closer to assimilating himself to Pavel through a recollection of his own youth: "He feels a pang of a kind. Memories of old feelings stir; the young man in him, not yet dead, tries to make himself heard, the corpse within him not yet buried." (226) At the surface it appears as if his own memories are revitalizing him, but on a deeper level "the young man in him", "the corpse within him not yet buried," points to Pavel. In the early acts of making love the initiative lies with Anna: "She comes to his room late and without warning. Again, through her, he passes into darkness and into the waters where his son floats among the other drowned." (58)

Towards the close of the novel they make love again, her lovemaking surprising him "by its recklessness." Her "cries and pantings" are not "sounds of animal pleasure," but "a means she uses to work herself into an erotic trance" (230): "At first her intensity carries itself over to him. There is a long passage in which he again loses all sense of who he is, who she is." (230) Losing a sense of self is a recurring theme, and Anna later points out to him: "There are times when I am not myself, you must get used to that." (232) At her climax, she whispers a word in his ear that he only half-catches: *devil*. (230) He muses: "*The devil*: the instant at the

[153] Looking forward, we could compare this with Paul Rayment's slow heart in *Slow Man*.

onset of the climax when the soul is twisted out of the body and begins its downward spiral into oblivion." Looking at her in this moment, "[…] it is not hard to see her too as possessed by the devil." (230)

The theme of the novel about to emerge, *The Possessed*, is artfully woven into the fabric of the narrative. In contrast, their first sexual encounters were carried out with little passion: "In the act there was nothing he can call pleasure or even sensation. It is as though they are making love through a sheet, the grey, tattered sheet of his grief." (56). Later, she is "growing 'electric' in the manner of so many other women he has known." (230) Her 'electric' quality can be related to the "electric being" Elizabeth Costello proposes as a measure for the successful representational embodiment of living beings. In their embodied states the two lovers have a brush with evil; this becomes more obvious in the conversation that follows, where Anna begs him to leave her and her daughter alone, accusing him of using her as "a route to [her] child" (231), going on to claim he is "in the grip of something quite beyond [her]." Her sexual compliance is now revealed to be a strategy to protect her daughter from his dark desires. Dostoevsky rejects her accusation and swears he would never hurt the child, but Anna replies: "What do you believe in that you can swear by?" (232) Again we might think of Elizabeth Costello "At the Gate" (EC 193-225), who claims to hold beliefs only provisionally, failing to deliver a convincing statement of belief in the final chapter.[154]

Their talks home in on matters of the heart and the soul. Anna is the most pragmatic character of the novel, not only in her function as Dostoevsky's landlady, but also in her straight-forward manner of addressing problems, both her own and his. She senses how the writer tries to use her as a vehicle to reach out to Pavel, but expresses that his artistic rather than his erotic faculties might be better suited to the task:

> "You are an artist, a master," she says. "It is for you, not for me, to bring him back to life."
> *Master*. It is a word he associates with metal – with the tempering of swords, the casting of bells, a foundry-master. *Master of life*: strange term. But he is prepared to reflect on it. He will give a home to any word, no matter how strange, no matter how stray, if there is a chance it is an anagram for Pavel.
> "I am far from being a master," he says. "There is a crack running through me. What can one do with a cracked bell? A cracked bell cannot be mended." (140f)

He takes in her words and processes them, still hoping to find a trace of Pavel in the words he receives from her. The metaphor of the cracked bell recalls the orphic theme of calling out to the dead through music; the idea behind it (proposed by Anna but here refused by Dostoevsky) being that literature might be a more adequate means of reaching out to those not

[154] I have omitted the act of writing in which Nechaev tricks him into giving a written statement in the chapter "The printing press"; it is directed at a writer's political responsibility, which would shift the discussion too much away from the sympathetic imagination and its relation to empathy.

at hand. The term "*Master of life*" does not originate from his dialogue with Anna, but from his own thoughts; and it reflects the authority a writer assumes in the creation of his fictional worlds – a thought that recurs in Elizabeth Costello's turn of phrase "secretary of the invisible" (EC 199).[155] In this narrative, Dostoevsky could be seen as assuming a similar role; searching for the invisible remains of Pavel, finding a new theme for his art through the mother and daughter he encounters. Attempting to penetrate their raison d'être, he can only recognize the forces at work in himself, revealing his dark passions.

After the sexual encounter he compares himself to a lion (128) – earlier he was an "old blinkering horse" (186). When he tries to hide Nechaev's clothes, turning more and more desperate in the attempt and ending up in a small alley, the animal comparison becomes embodied: "On all fours, raising his head, sniffing the air like a wild animal, he tries to concentrate his attention on the horizon inside himself." (164) The "wild animal" inside of him makes him aware of his "inner horizon"; I take this to refer to the potential movements of his inner being, of his heart and soul, limited by a distant horizon. It points both to his sympathetic imagination, which will enable him to cover ground within his inner cosmos, and to his empathy, which will allow him to feel himself into the spots he moves to. Translated into the terms of the outside world, Dostoevsky will not only be able to reach out to his fellow humans, but instead will be forced to transgress all propriety in appropriating all encounters into his art. Coetzee might here have developed a case study of how both the sympathetic imagination and the power of empathy can turn against both the writer and the subjects of his imagination; one could relate this to the chapter "The Problem of Evil" in *Elizabeth Costello*, where Costello discusses whether the sympathetic imagination might go too far in some cases. Her initial claim that there are no limits to the sympathetic imagination is largely technical, without any moral imperative implied. On the contrary, in moral terms she cautiously raises objections to a boundless sympathetic imagination in "The Problem of Evil."

When Matryona discovers her mother and the writer in bed together, Dostoevsky, seeing "the grave child at the door" (232), thinks to himself: "She sees all, she knows all." (233) The innocent child we read about in the beginning – her first appearance in front of the house on 63 Svechnoi Street shows her playing with other children, throwing pebbles into

[155] The phrase refers to the poem "Secretaries" by Czeslaw Milosz:

> I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing
> That is dictated to me and a few others.
> Secretaries, mutually unknown, we walk the earth
> Without much comprehension. Beginning a phrase in the middle
> Or ending it with a comma. And how it looks when completed
> Is not up to us to inquire, we won't read it anyway. (Milosz 2001: 141)

puddles – has now been corrupted by the writer's presence, by his need to channel his memories of Pavel through her. In a sense Dostoevsky has become Stavrogin, as the final chapter of the novel is titled.

The writer's authority brings along the writer's responsibility for his fictions and the effect they have on the reader, and also how they reflect back on the writer. Dostoevsky's dealing with Anna Sergeyevna's daughter Matryona, eponymous with the seduced child in *The Possessed*, showcase this potential conflict. In the chapter "Disguise" we read how attached Matryona was to Pavel, maybe even in love with him, and how subsequently she regards Nechaev as a trustworthy friend, since he was a friend of Pavel – more so than Dostoevsky, the stepfather, ever was. The writer senses that Matryona's connection to Pavel, even after his demise, is stronger than the bond he is attempting to evoke. When he notices that Matryona is no longer tending to the shrine built to honour Pavel, he surmises: "Does she guess […] that the only voices he [Dostoevsky] hears now are devil-voices?" (126) In a conversation with the mother, Dostoevsky calls the child a "conductress of souls" (139), expressing his hope that she might lead him to Pavel.

When his desire for the mother again becomes intense, he imagines writing a book of transgression – the informed reader will recognize this as an outline for Stavrogin's confession in *The Possessed*. He terms it "Imaginary memoirs. Memories of the imagination." (134) He names Anna Sergeyevna as "true begetter" of this story (a term familiar from Susan Barton and her narrative of the island). The victim in the evolving story is the daughter, to whom the narrator shamelessly reveals the story of how he seduced a young girl. This story of his distresses the daughter so much that she ultimately gives herself up to him "in the most shameful of ways" (in *The Possessed* it results in her suicide). Dostoevsky continues his line of thought, wondering whether the writing of a "book of evil" could "liberate himself from evil" or would instead "cut himself off from good." (134) He realizes how Pavel has no place in this story (the father has taken the place of the son), and cannot help but feel "a quiver of dark triumph." (135) The "murderous tenderness" of the father for his dead child (125) now also comes to affect the girl, at least in the writer's imagination, which remains the main stage of the whole narrative.

### 3.3.6 On Writing and Demonic Desires – Acts of Writing

*The Master of Petersburg* unfolds before us a panorama of the writing process, embodied by the writer figure Dostoevsky. In *Foe* Coetzee used the trope of the writer Daniel Defoe, but it didn't go much further than showcasing the writing desk and placing Susan

Barton and Friday in the writer's position. In *The Master of Petersburg*, the reader gets a closer look at the writer's imagination. Being presented from the perspective of the writer in a third person narrative, we become witness to the spurning of a new novel.

Several acts of writing take place in the course of the narrative. The first act of writing produces a letter: "He writes to his wife in Dresden. His letters are reassuring but empty of feeling." (22) The second time he writes a note to Apollon Maykov, a benefactor of both himself and Pavel. (51) He then again writes to his wife, attempting to grasp the lingering presence of Pavel's spirit, but then tears up the letter: "It is nonsense; it is also a betrayal of what remains between himself and his son." (52) Abandoning the letter, he continues his thoughts for us to read: "His son is inside him, a dead baby in an iron box. [...] Every gesture of his hands is made with the slowness of a frozen man." (52) Tearing up the letter to his wife has symbolic value, as it frees him from old responsibilities and allows him to follow a more selfish course of action, such as dealing with his grief and finding the theme for his next work of art.

The next time he sits down to write, it is a letter addressed to Anna Sergeyevna, after she does not join him in bed for a third night of love-making. (59) She leaves the letter on the table, un-opened; turning his attempt of written communication into a failure. This writing still remains in the realm of 'private matters', but has shifted from old connections to a new encounter, which in turn will spawn the theme for his next novel. Communications with his wife (reporting his situation) and Maykov (asking for money) are from here on reduced to a minimum. (168)

Acts of creative writing are of greater interest in this context, and Coetzee depicts two such moments. The first time occurs very early in the narrative, even before the written communications mentioned above, but it is stunted and leads to nothing:

> Following old habit, he spends the morning at the little desk in his room. When the maid comes to clean, he waves her away. But he does not write a word. It is not that he is paralysed. His heart pumps steadily, his mind is clear. At any moment he is capable of picking up the pen and forming letters on the paper. But the writing, he fears, would be that of a madman – vileness, obscenity, page after page of it, untameable. He thinks of the madness as running through the artery of his right arm down to the fingertips and the pen and so to the page. It runs in a stream; he need not dip the pen, not once. What flows on to the paper is neither blood nor ink but an acid, black, with an unpleasing green sheen when the light glances off it. On the page it does not dry: if one were to pass a finger over it, one would experience a sensation both liquid and electric. A writing that even the blind could read. (18)[156]

[156] Compare this to Susan Barton sitting at Foe's desk and writing: "It is as though animalcules of words lie dissolved in your ink-well, ready to be dipped up and flow from your pen and take form on the paper." (FOE 93)

The production of narrative text is shown to be the result of a habitual routine. In this case, however, there is no result; instead, Coetzee describes in detail the inner state of the writer in relation to his writing, imagining the "acid" sensation of the act of writing. The passage shows how personally invested acts of writing can be, lending the script a "sensation both liquid and electric." The physical properties of the ink are invoked, linked at the same time to the act of reading, which picks up on what the author invested into the text.

Dostoevsky is unforgiving in his self-assessment as writer. In the last chapter, "Stavrogin," he recalls how Maximov's assistant asked him what kind of books he writes, and the reply he gave: "Stories. Story-books." Questioned further, he added: "Nothing that could offend a child," and as an afterthought: "But the heart has its dark places," [...] "One does not always know." (144) In the meantime he has learnt more about the dark places of his heart through his grief over Pavel's death and his dealings with Anna and Matryona, Nechaev and Isaev. Now he thinks of a more truthful answer: "I write perversions of the truth. I choose the crooked road and take children into dark places. I follow the dance of the pen." (236)

The theme of betrayal runs deep in this novel; the grieving father suffers from the notion that his writing is a betrayal. His sense of transgression dates back to his childhood:

> As a child he used to spy on visitors to the household and trespass surreptitiously on their privacy. It is a weakness that he has associated till now with a refusal to accept limits to what he is permitted to know, with the reading of forbidden books, and thus with his vocation. (71)

The aged writer has left behind the privacies of the household and has become entangled with the intricacies of politics. After reading the diary of Pavel, Dostoevsky comments on his relationship to Russia in a way that resonates with Coetzee's statements about his conflicted relationship to South Africa:

> I mean that I am not here in Russia in this time of ours to live a life free of pain. I am required to live – what shall I call it? – a Russian life: a life inside Russia, or with Russia inside me, and whatever Russia means. It is not a fate I can evade. [...]
> In fact, it is not so much a life as a price or a currency. It is something I pay with in order to write. That is what Pavel did not understand: that I pay too. [...]
> A life without honour; treachery without limit; confession without end. (221-2)

Writing is here proposed to be a type of endless confession of someone implicated in the doings of a wholly undesired regime – this theme was also addressed and explicated in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The Magistrate ultimately stood up against the politics of the empire he was representing, his transformation initiated through the encounter with the barbarian girl in the privacy of his chamber. Dostoevsky follows a different route. His opposition to the state authority remains within the sphere of private matters, so the writer rejects joining any cause beyond his own. This refusal of a course of action beyond the art of

writing is part of what occasions his sense of betrayal. In a more private sense, it is the betrayal of those close to him, who he cannot help but to incorporate into his art: "*Perversion*: everything and everyone to be turned to another use, to be gripped to him and fall with him." (235; original italics) Earlier in the novel, in the chapter titled "Nechaev," Dostoevsky imagines the Finn girl and Pavel making love: "He resists the thought, then yields." He yields to his imagination, allowing it to create an obscene image of the coupling. He goes on to compare this feasting on his imagination to the act of a scavenger, an "old grey rat" feasting on the corpse of Pavel, seeing "what is left for him." (107)

Compared with the first writing session and its futility, his pen has resumed its dance in the final chapter. What Coetzee writes in the closing paragraph of his essay collection *Giving Offense – Essays On Censorship* about Breytenbach's compromised position applies equally to the writer figure Dostoevsky:

> In intense moments, writing can throw up evidences of bloody or asphyxiating struggles against blockages and resistance: gagged words gagged out. The voice struggles to breathe in, breathe out, against intimate persecutory figures. […] But the very gesture of blaming, so widespread in his writing, mirroring the blaming of him by censor and judge, belongs to an ultimately futile strategy of demonization and expulsion. The poems that emerged with him from prison into the fresh air point to a much harder task: that of living with his daimon and his demons. (GO 232)

In *The Master of Petersburg* the political dimension of writing emerges in the encounters with the state (represented by Councillor Maximov) and the revolutionary forces (represented by Nechaev); most prominently in the chapters "Maximov" and "The printing press." The figure of the censor transgresses the political dimension and also appears in the personal struggle of the writer figure Dostoevsky. The following passage (with several omissions) illustrates the writer's confrontation both with himself and with the figure of the censor:

> He moves the chair so as not to face the mirror. But the sense of someone in the room besides himself persists: if not of a full person then of a stick-figure, a scarecrow draped in an old suit, with a stuffed sugar-sack for a head and a kerchief across the mouth. [...]
> For hours he sits at the table. The pen does not move. Intermittently the stick-figure returns, the crumpled, old-man travesty of himself. He is blocked, he is in prison. […]
> He closes his eyes, makes himself confront the figure, makes the image grow clearer. Across the face there is still a veil, which he seems powerless to remove. Only the figure itself can do that; and it will not do so before it is asked. To ask, he must know its name. What is the name? […]
> If he let the pen fall, would the figure across the table take it up and write? [...]
> From the figure he feels nothing, nothing at all. Or rather he feels around it a field of indifference tremendous in its force, like a cloak of darkness. Is that why he cannot find the name –not because the name is hidden but because the figure is indifferent to all names, all words, anything that might be said about it?
> The force is so strong that he feels it pressing out upon him, wave upon silent wave. [...]
> He knows he is in peril of gambling on the second chance. As soon as he lays his stake on the second chance, he will have lost. He must do what he cannot do: resign himself to what will come, speech or silence. (236-239)

The censor figure oscillates between the political and the personal realm. The scene is set up so as not to place Dostoevsky facing the mirror, but the ensuing thoughts nevertheless create a mirror image of the writer. The struggle he is going through here resembles closely the struggle with his grief and his reaching out to Pavel. Expecting the unexpected, attending to the unattended without pre-positioning his attention or pre-formulating his expectations. Remaining open to what is to come, emptying oneself of the "I" in order to embrace the "He"; a redoubled self relieved of all its properties. This seems to be the credo of the writer at work, and: "This is the spirit in which he sits at Pavel's table, his eyes fixed on the phantasm opposite him whose attention is no less implacable than his own, whom it has been given to him to bring into being." (240) Whereas in his earlier attempt he failed to overcome silence and arrive at speech, he is now only a moment away from crossing the threshold into his own fiction. From this emerges a "vision of Pavel grown beyond childhood and beyond love" ("in the manner of an insect"). "Confronting it is like descending into the waters of the Nile […] This presence, so grey and without feature – is this what he must father, give blood to, flesh, life?" (240) Dostoevsky considers whether it is not himself (or a version of himself) he must give birth to in his writing, resurrection becoming the overpowering impulse regardless of its subject: "Following this shade he will go naked as a babe into the jaws of hell." (241) The orphic theme (following a shade) leads on to an imaginary confrontation with Pavel's dead body, "naked and broken and bloody." (241) In the chapter "The shot tower" Dostoevsky had been confronted with the death itself, re-imagining it; now he faces its result in all its finality, the dead body of his stepson Pavel. This somewhat final acceptance of Pavel's death, now embodied and going beyond what the writer's sympathetic imagination had tried so hard to hold on to, to bring back to life, triggers a release in the writer: "Thus at last the time arrives and the hand that holds the pen begins to move. But the words it forms are not words of salvation." (241)

His pen moves to tell the story of a child in bed with a man, a man with a face "that will not be seen." (241) He stops, resisting "a descent into representations that have no place in the world" (241), sensing the moment that announces his fall, "a moment of which he is becoming a connoisseur, a voluptuary. For which he will be damned." (242) Nonetheless, the writer also feels that Pavel is returning to life in the disguise of his new literary character, with a body "as perfectly formed as a god's" (241) – quite in contrast to the shattered body Dostoevsky had confronted himself with earlier. In a literary sense, Dostoevsky has conquered his grief and returned Pavel to life:

> In the blood of this young man, this version of Pavel, is a sense of triumph. He has passed through the gates of death and returned; nothing can touch him any more. He is not a god but he is no longer human either. He is, in some sense, beyond the human, beyond man. There is nothing he is not capable of. (242)

While until now Pavel has been the dead centre of the novel, mourned for and remembered with sympathy, he now returns as the monster of Dostoevsky's imagination that will constitute the epicentre of *The Possessed*. The imagination of the writer figure reaches beyond the sympathetic, creating a figure whose empathy is directed at enticing a little girl and perverting her through untimely sexual arousal and abandonment. Dostoevsky aborts the narrative, but his restlessness drives him to pick up a new thread:

> From the suitcase he takes Pavel's diary and turns to the first empty page, the page that the child did not write on because by then he was dead. On this page he begins, a second time, to write. (242)

This time Coetzee gives to the reader the text being created under the heading "The Apartment." While the first attempt depicted the aftermath of Stavrogin's seduction of the child, of which he reports in his confession to Tikhon in *The Possessed*, this next attempt takes a step back and shows how Stavrogin notices the child's curiosity about his sexual affairs and how he decides to seduce her. This passage covers about two-and-a-half pages, before the master narrative picks up again:

> He writes all of this in a clear, careful script, crossing not a word. In the act of writing he experiences, today, an exceptional sensual pleasure – in the feel of the pen, snug in the crook of his thumb, but even more in the feel of his hand being tugged back lightly from its course across the page by the strict, unvarying shape of the letters, the discipline of the alphabet. […]
> If he writes so clearly today, it is because he is no longer writing for her [his wife's] eyes. He is writing for himself. He is writing for eternity. He is writing for the dead. (245)

The reader is now introduced to the "sensual pleasure" of the act of writing, at this point not linked with the sensual pleasure elicited in the text itself, the transgression Dostoevsky commented on as being grossly pleasurable. It stands in contrast to his earlier attempt, when the writer anticipated the vileness of what would flow from his pen. The grief has been transformed into art, and Pavel has been resurrected in literature, not as himself but as a new other, a terrible and forsaken manifestation that abandons all morals in favour of self-excitement and entertainment.

Coetzee sets an example of the crooked paths writing can take under given circumstances, and also what sacrifices the vocation of a writer might entail when those closest to him are lost to him and then sacrificed for the sake of art. After Dostoevsky had read the "private papers" made available by Maximov, he expressed his thoughts about the story Pavel has written, laying bare the anguish of his profession:

> If you are blessed with the power to write, he wants to say, bear in mind the source of that power. You write *because* your childhood was lonely, *because* you were not loved. (*Yet that is not the full story*, he also wants to say – *you were loved, you would have been loved, it was your choice to be unloved*. What confusion! An ape on a harmonium would do better!) We do not write out of plenty, he wants to say – we write out of anguish, out of lack. Surely in your heart you must know that! As for your so-called true father and his revolutionary sympathies, what nonsense! Isaev was a clerk, a pen-pusher. If he had lived, if you had followed him, you too would have become nothing but a clerk, and you would not have left this story behind. (*Yes, yes*, he hears the child's high voice – *but I would be alive!*) (152; original italics)

### 3.3.7 On Embodied Reading

Acts of writing are showcased prominently in *The Master of Petersburg*. Acts of reading are commented on in a supplementary fashion, and they are presented as a form of embodiment. When Dostoevsky reads Pavel's diary, Dostoevsky's attention shifts to the production of the text, away from the narrative content:

> What makes reading so difficult he cannot say, but his attention keeps wandering from the sense of the words to the words themselves, to the letters on the paper, to the trace in ink of the hand's movements, the shading left by the pressure of the fingers. (216)

The writer assimilates the writing of his son to his own acts of writing; yet another instance of identifying with the lost son, of attempting to inhabit the empty space left behind, just as he sits at Pavel's desk to perform his own writing. The writer's position is doubled, and in his reading Dostoevsky senses this: "Every word double: to the one, passion and the promise of surrender; to the other, a plea, a reproach. Split writing, from a split heart. Would Maximov have appreciated that?" (219)

In his conversation with Maximov the aged writer discusses the effects reading might have: "Let me tell you then: reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering." (47) To which Maximov replies: "But you speak of reading as thought it were demon-possession." (47) We are again at the heart of the matter; in this case the matter of reading. Coetzee seems to point out how acts of reading might be not too different from acts of writing. Both are invested with the sympathetic imagination unbound. The reader inhabits a text, which was previously inhabited by the writer. The text becomes embodied in both the writer and the reader, takes possession of them. The demons mentioned by Maximov are merely a metaphor – just as muses are – for the inner movements evoked by a text. As the writer embodies his characters he encourages an embodied reading.

### 3.3.8 The Trajectory of Grief – It tastes like gall

In *The Master of Petersburg* we follow in the tracks of a grieving father until he arrives at the inception of his new novel. Needless to say, the main character is a proxy for Coetzee himself – not as part of an equation but as a fellow spirit, evoked by the author. Coetzee portrays the writer figure Dostoevsky with great care and attention, which is directed at the writer's grief, his political allegiances and his artistic articulations. Particularly in the portrayal of the father's grief the reader can sense the intensity of his emotions; reading of the author's desperate struggle for redemption will necessarily inspire feelings of empathy in the reader. We learn about the convolutions of grief, and though it might remain a second-hand experience, Coetzee brings it close to us by employing his sympathetic imagination in the creation of the writer figure Dostoevsky. The reader cannot help but feel himself into the writer's situation in an empathetic co-existence.

The complex trajectory of grief allows the self-centred fatherly "I" to adopt the position of a more compassionate "He". Along with this comes the insight into the sacrifice he has made for the sake of his art, for his calling, his vocation. In the end, Dostoevsky denies the acute pleasure of guilt accepted and embraced, but is instead left with a bitter emptiness. Whereas all previous novels had either ended on a note of potential redemption, or provided the reader with somewhat open endings, the reader is now confronted with the finality of death and the endless grief of a bereaved father:

> He picks up his hat and leaves his lodgings. He does not recognize the hat, has no idea whose shoes he is wearing. In fact, he recognizes nothing of himself. If he were to look in the mirror now, he would not be surprised if another face were to loom up, staring back blindly at him.
> He has betrayed everyone; nor does he see that his betrayals could go deeper. If he ever wanted to know whether betrayal tasted more like vinegar or like gall, now is the time.
> But there is no taste at all in his mouth, just as there is no weight on his heart. His heart, in fact, feels quite empty. He had not known beforehand it would be like this. But how could he have known? Not torment but a dull absence of torment. Like a soldier shot on the battlefield, bleeding, seeing the blood, feeling no pain, wondering: Am I dead already?
> It seems to him a great price to pay. *They pay him lots of money for writing books*, said the child, repeating the dead child. What they failed to say was that he had to give up his soul in return.
> Now he begins to taste it. It tastes like gall. (250)

# 4. Academia and the Aging Body– *Disgrace* (2003) and *Slow Man* (2005)

## 4.1 Disgrace - The Sympathetic Imagination of David Lurie

My first encounter with the fiction of Coetzee occurred in a course at the Free University of Berlin in 2005 offered by Robert Stockhammer. We read *Disgrace* next to Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000). As much as Coetzee's compelling prose delighted me, I found it hard to relate to the aging professor and his problematic sexual desires (Lurie in this regard is comparable to Roth's protagonist Coleman Silk). Obviously, this presentation has strategic purposes, as Kate McInturff remarks:

> The character David is, himself, notoriously unsympathetic to the novel's readers. The portrayal of David as stubborn, self-indulgent, and sexist (or misogynist) is itself a provocation to the reader to consider the difficulties inherent in sympathizing with another being and to avoid the failures represented by David's own attempts at sympathy. (McInturff 2007: 8)

Only now, in a renewed reading with the sympathetic imagination and processes of empathy in mind, have I come to reassess *Disgrace* and have found it to be an intimate study of how the sympathetic imagination can develop in a man who thinks himself beyond moral development: "His temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperaments: the two hardest parts of the body." (D 2) This notwithstanding, in *Disgrace* Coetzee challenges the reader to accompany David Lurie on his personal journey towards a more sympathetic imagination.

### 4.1.1 The Predator David Lurie and His Female Encounters

> For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well. (D 1)[157]

This first sentence of *Disgrace* contains in nuclei the tragic flaw of David Lurie, who believes to have arrived at a satisfactory solution for his sexual desires, which have absolute priority for him. In the following his complacency is harshly disrupted. The first woman we hear about is the prostitute Soraya, who serves as solution to Lurie's "problem of sex." When she disappears from his life, the student Melanie appears on the scene and Lurie invites her to his home and seduces her. Their affair turns sour soon, but Lurie fails to withdraw his attention from her, and Melanie files a complaint with the university. Lurie is subjected to a hearing

[157] Coetzee 2000 [1999]. All quotes in section 4 will be from D unless indicated otherwise.

before a commission that asks him to publicly apologize, which he stubbornly refuses; consequently he is relieved of his duties. After this first turning point, Lurie leaves Cape Town behind and goes to visit his daughter Lucy on her farm in Salem in the Eastern Cape. Father and daughter do not get along too well, but things get worse when they are assaulted by three men, who rape Lucy and set Lurie on fire – this marks the second turning point in the novel. The physical assault and Lurie's helplessness in the face of it initiate a change in him, towards a position of humility. Tentatively, he begins to help Bev Shaw in her animal clinic, where she treats animals and puts down dogs that are "*too menny*." (146; original italics and original spelling) Lurie has a brief affair with Bev, in spite of not feeling attracted to her. His awakening humility before life allows him to establish more meaningful relations – ironically primarily with dogs, but also with his daughter and others.

Coetzee showcases Lurie's change of heart and thereby illustrates the awakening of his sympathetic imagination. In a first step, I will discuss the failure of his sympathetic faculties in regard to Soraya, Melanie and Lucy.[158] The gradual improvements of the relationship between father and daughter and Lurie's growing fondness for the dogs will serve to illustrate Lurie's emotional development. In the end, the reader might still not like the character; but he will find it hard to deny the development of his – Lurie's, and ultimately the reader's – sympathetic faculties. Especially Lurie's shifting relation to the dogs links back to the discussion of *The Lives of Animals* in the introduction.

**Soraya**

The opening chapter of *Disgrace* introduces us to Soraya, or rather to David Lurie's perception of her. For the narrative, Soraya's function is merely to introduce us to David Lurie's perception of women, which focuses largely on appearances and imagined reciprocity: "Soraya is tall and slim, with long black hair and dark, liquid eyes." (1) The dark liquid eyes might remind the reader of the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, who served as a projection surface for the Magistrate, just as Soraya does for Lurie.

> Because he takes pleasure in her, because his pleasure is unfailing, an affection has grown up in him for her. To some degree, he believes, this affection is reciprocated. Affection may not be love, but it is at least its cousin. Given their unpromising beginnings, they have been lucky, the two of them: he to have found her, she to have found him. (2)

[158] Kate McInturff provides an excellent reading of *Disgrace* with a stronger focus on Lurie's narcissist utilization of others (both women and dogs): "Coetzee's assertion of the importance of imagining the body of the other in its non-utilitarian being allows for an ethics of sympathy that does not deny the difference or objectifying difference as it recognizes it." (McInturff 2007: 11)

The attachment expressed here seems largely connected to his habituated sexual satisfaction. But already at this early point, David Lurie is not without insight regarding his own shortcomings: "His sentiments are, he is aware, complacent, even uxorious. Nevertheless he does not cease to hold to them." (2) Aware of the one-sidedness of their agreement, Lurie pronounces a fairly modest self-assessment: "Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be, he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest." (3)[159]

As common in relations of this nature, Soraya knows a lot more about him than he about her. Lurie has only a vague impression of her: "In her general opinions she is surprisingly moralistic." (1) She is offended by the loose morals of tourists and thinks vagabonds should be put to work. That is as far as it goes: "How she reconciles her opinions with her line of business he does not ask." (1) The one-way communication (words and semen go in one direction only) reveals a total lack of interest in her private life – a failure largely resulting from their professional relation, but beyond that indicating Lurie's self-centeredness.

One day he spots her in the city with two boys. He trails them and passes by twice outside the inn they have entered." For an instant, through the glass, Soraya's eyes meet his." (6) This eye contact in a public setting unsettles their private relation. In this moment, the real woman has stepped out behind the masquerade that Lurie has enjoyed so far. His first reflex is to classify the look on Soraya's face as one of desire, but he immediately concedes his mistake: "He has always been a man of the city, at home amid a flux of bodies where eros stalks and glances flash like arrows. But this glance between himself and Soraya he regrets at once." (6) During their next appointment he imagines the two boys to be standing by and witnessing their coupling ("presences between them" 6); while he "becomes, fleetingly, their father: foster-father, step-father, shadow-father" (6) – we might think of Coetzee's Dostoevsky (shadow-father to Pavel) here, likewise of Paul Rayment in *Slow Man* (foster-father to young Jokić). On their fourth meeting after the incident she informs him that she will take a break to look after her mother. Hiring a detective agency, he tracks down Soraya, well-aware of his transgression: "He ought to close that chapter." (9) Instead he calls her, but is rejected and even commanded to never call her again: "Her shrillness surprises him: there has been no intimation of it before. But then, what should a predator expect when he intrudes into the vixen's nest, into the home of her cubs?" (10)

[159] This corresponds with the ironic self-portrayal of Coetzee as a lover in *Summertime*.

At the close of the first chapter we see David Lurie for what he is (or rather how he sees himself): a predator of women. Though unaware of the other's thoughts and feelings, he is well aware of his own ambivalences and self-serving fictions. After a disappointing affair with a secretary he graphically imagines self-castration, by which he might outwit his predatory nature: "A man on a chair snipping away at himself: an ugly sight, but no more ugly, from a certain point of view, than the same man exercising himself on the body of a woman." (9) To cut it short, Coetzee has introduced us to Lurie's inner ugliness and emptiness, which will be revealed further in his dealings with Melanie.

**Melanie**

The second chapter continues the course taken in the beginning. He runs into Melanie: "She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes." (11) This brief description echoes the description of Soraya in chapter one, creating a link between the two as prey of David Lurie. As in chapter one, where Lurie reminisces on the glances he used to earn from women, he is well-aware of the implications of his gaze: "Does she know he has an eye on her? Probably. Women are sensitive to it, to the weight of the desiring gaze." (12)

In contrast to his dealings with Soraya, the affair with Melanie is marked by sparks of conversation, commented on by Lurie in a reflective and cautious manner, as for example when they watch a dance movie, a moment that accentuates the gap between them: "He wills the girl to be captivated too. But he senses she is not." (15) For the first time we see Lurie making an effort to sense the other's feelings; in this case arriving at a plausible assessment. After being invited to stay over, she decides to leave. As if to reassert his initial position of predator, "[h]e reaches out, enfolds her. For a moment he can feel her little breasts against him. Then she slips his embrace and is gone." (17) Depending on the reader's own position, one might find Lurie's attempted seduction abominable (abuse of power), flawed (misguided desire) or even acceptable (consenting adults). Opening chapter three, Lurie concedes: "That is where he ought to end it." (18) Instead, he follows the same pattern as with Soraya and obtains Melanie's phone number from the student records and calls. She fails to refuse his invitation for an outing. Afterwards, back at his house, they make love on the living-room floor: "[T]hough she is passive throughout, he finds the act pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into blank oblivion." (19) Just like the Magistrate after his ritual washing of the barbarian girl, the physical encounter with the woman allows the man to lose himself, with the woman being left behind. When he comes back (from oblivion) he takes in

the picture of the two of them: Him with his trousers around his ankles and his hands under her sweater on her breasts, her with a slight frown on her face. (19) His reference to the painter George Grosz, famous for his depictions of the deformities of humans (both war victims and others), shows how aware he is of the abnormity of the situation. Melanie's discomfort is palpable to the reader, but hardly registered by Lurie at this point: "Averting her face, she frees herself, gathers her things, leaves the room. In a few minutes she is back, dressed. 'I must go,' she whispers. He makes no effort to detain her." (19) Unaffected by her hurried departure, Lurie revels: "He wakes the next morning in a state of profound well-being, which does not go away." (19-20) Having achieved his goal, any budding empathy for Melanie becomes superfluous.

Two days later (it rains) he offers her a ride home: "Her face is flushed; he is aware of the rise and fall of her chest. She licks away a drop of rain from her upper lip. *A child!* he thinks: *No more than a child! What am I doing?* Yet his heart lurches with desire." (20; original italics) Lurie remains a man driven by desire, unwilling or unable to restrain himself. He reads Melanie's body language alternately as urging him on or as displaying her discomfort. When he gives his lecture on Wordsworth, "[h]e casts a quick glance at her. Her head is bowed, she is absorbed in the text, or seems to be." (22) During the lecture, which has a double edge to it in references that could be applied to their situation, "[a] memory floods back: the moment on the floor when he forced the sweater up and exposed her neat, perfect little breasts. For the first time she looks up; her eyes meet his and in a flash see all. Confused, she drops her glance." (23) Note how the term "forced" is introduced casually in reference to the removal of her sweater. Note also the mirroring of the look Lurie exchanged with Soraya, which was the beginning of the end of their relation. Her seeing "all" in a flash could imply her recognition of his predatory nature, though it seems to imply far more than just that. His ramblings on Wordsworth go on for another paragraph, only to be followed by a moment of self-deprecation: "Enough! He is sick of the sound of his own voice, and sorry for her too, having to listen to these covert intimacies." (23) For the first time, we detect empathy in Lurie. On the other hand, his growing attachment closely resembles the habituation he had experienced with Soraya: "A week ago she was just another pretty face in the class. Now she is a presence in his life, a breathing presence." (23) He goes to watch a rehearsal of Melanie, then on the next day visits her at her flat: "He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. When he takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette's." (24) The predator-prey scenario is continued here, now with the added image of Melanie as a lifeless puppet, subjected to Lurie's desiring gaze and the

longing of his body. This time, she resists and struggles, tells him "No, not now!"; "But nothing will stop him. He carries her to the bedroom, brushes off the absurd slippers, kisses her feet, astonished by the feeling she evokes." (25) Whereas their first coupling was largely consensual, this scene has caused an extensive debate over whether Lurie is here raping Melanie. My impression is that male readers are more willing to excuse Lurie's behaviour, while female readers condemn his actions more readily; in my personal view, both positions are built into the text and coexist in the narrative. The predatory metaphor recurs in the depiction of this scene:

> She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips. Little shivers of cold run through her, as soon as she is bare, she slips under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing, and turns her back on him.
> Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nonetheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away. (25)

Lurie's unsympathetic imagination allows him to carry on, to pull through with what his desire has driven him to. In the following, Melanie ceases to come to classes and does not answer the phone. Then, surprisingly, she visits him at his flat and asks to stay overnight: "He makes up a bed for her in his daughter's old room, kisses her good night, leaves her to herself." (26) The fatherly manner again mirrors a moment in his dealings with Soraya; the predator takes a break. Only to return the next morning, albeit still in the guise of fatherly care: "He sits down on the bed, draws her to him. In his arms she begins to sob miserably. Despite all, he feels a tingling of desire." (26) Melanie asks if she can stay "for a while," and Lurie, with a moment's hesitation, allows her to stay. In the afternoon, when he returns from his classes, "[s]he seems thoroughly at home." (27) Asking her about the cause of her distress, "[s]he avoids his eye. 'Not now,' she says. 'I have to go, I'm late. I'll explain next time.'" (28) Lurie senses that she has managed to regain some control over their relationship: "But if she has got away with much, he has got away with more; if she is behaving badly, he has behaved worse." (28) What do we make of Lurie's self-criticism? Lurie is well-aware of his transgression, but lastly justifies it with his over-powering desire. He presents it not as a question of choices, but as if he is compelled to follow through his course of action.

Back at university Melanie "keeps her distance" (31), but does reappear at the Monday class accompanied by a young man. Lurie lectures on Byron's scandals, and as before with Wordsworth, the poet's misadventures allude to the professor's own. Lurie glances at Melanie: "Today, looking thin and exhausted, she sits huddled over her book. Despite himself, his heart goes out to her. Poor little bird, he thinks, whom I have held against my breast!" (32)

The phrase of "the heart going out to someone" is a recurring theme in Coetzee's characters (remember Eugene Dawn and his wife). The image of the bird is here phrased with pity in terms of an embrace, even though the terms of a predator might have more rightfully placed her in his jaws. His lecture on Byron's 'Lara' reflects his own behaviour:

> […] Note that we are not asked to condemn this being with the mad heart, this being with whom there is something constitutionally wrong. On the contrary, we are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: a *thing*, that is, a monster. […] (33-34)

Coetzee is testing the limits of our sympathy by juxtaposing 'the monster' Byron and Lurie, who both believe to stand outside (and above) social conventions, instead conceding supremacy to their desire. And once again, his desire presses him to call Melanie to him after class: "Pinch-faced, exhausted, she stands before him. Again his heart goes out to her. If they were alone he would embrace her, try to cheer her up. *My little dove*, he would call her." (34; original italics) David Lurie feels sympathy (benevolent pity) for Melanie, and though his desire remains a standing fact, his sympathy seems genuine, but not welcomed by Melanie. Back at his office he asks her to take the test she missed. And here a significant shift takes place. Until now, dialogue was our only access to Melanie's thoughts. Now, we get to hear Lurie's speculation on her thoughts, which are presented in italics:

> She stares back at him in puzzlement, even shock. *You have cut me off from everyone*, she seems to want to say. *You have made me bear your secret. I am no longer just a student. How can you speak to me like this?* […]
> She raises her chin, meets his eye defiantly. Either she has not understood or she is refusing the opening. (35; original italics)

Whether Lurie's speculation is accurate or not we cannot tell, but its plausibility is underscored by the changed typeset, as if he was reading her mind. For the first time, we see an empathetic attitude in Lurie, albeit in dire circumstances.

In chapter five his affair with his student becomes public. At first, he receives a call from Melanie's worried father, Mr Isaacs, who asks Lurie to talk Melanie out of dropping out of university – obviously he is unaware of the affair:

> "She always takes things so to heart, Professor, that's her nature, she gets very involved. […]"
> So Melanie-Meláni, with her baubles from the Oriental Plaza and her blind spot for Wordsworth, takes things to heart. He would not have guessed it. What else has he not guessed about her? (37)

These are new questions in Lurie's repertoire. With Soraya, Lurie failed to even consider her position, her perspective. With Melanie, Lurie begins to open up to the possibility that she has feelings and that it might be worth the effort to imagine what they might be. In his dealings with Melanie his sympathetic imagination is awakened; not in a very strong sense, but we can

sense the beginning of something. However, things come to a head and Mr Isaacs appears in person to confront him, a complaint is filed and Lurie is charged with sexual harassment and has to appear before a university committee (chapter six). Chapter five ends with Lurie meeting his ex-wife Rosalind (43-44), who states her position regarding the affair clearly:

> Don't expect sympathy from me, David, and don't expect sympathy from anyone else either. No sympathy, no mercy, not in this day and age. Everyone's hand will be against you, and why not? Really, how *could* you? (44; original italics)

Rosalind's stance will most likely be shared by many readers; at the same time Coetzee has already navigated the reader into a position of proximity to Lurie. And Lurie's awareness of his transgressions (as opposed to straight-out denial) does point towards a potential series of confession, repentance and redemption.[160]

**Lucy**

After losing his position at the university, David Lurie goes to visit his daughter Lucy in "Salem on the Grahamstown-Kenton road in the Eastern Cape." (59) The setting shifts from urban to rural, from prostitutes and affairs to his daughter. The very first encounter between the two marks the difference: "Comfortably barefoot, she comes to greet him, holding her arms wide, embracing him, kissing him on the cheek. What a nice girl, he thinks, hugging her; what a nice welcome at the end of a long trip!" (59) While enjoying the display of affection of his daughter, we soon find out that he has a low opinion of her lifestyle:

> Dogs and a gun; bread in the oven and a crop in the earth. Curious that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share. (60-61)

When he sees how well she has settled into the place, Lurie offers a more consoling assessment: "A solid woman, embedded in her new life. Good! If this is to be what he leaves behind – this daughter, this woman .then he does not have to be ashamed." (62)

Their relation seems cordial, but not free of tension. Lurie takes care not to make her uncomfortable, such as when they have tea: "He is hungry: he wolfs down too blocklike slices of bread with prickly-pear jam, also home-made. He is aware of her eyes on him as he eats. He must be careful: nothing so distasteful to a child as the workings of a parent's body." (61) His thoughtfulness towards his daughter contrasts strongly with his urban relations to women. The predator in him is forced to rest, but does appear on the sidelines, be it in a small way as in "wolfing down" food, or in a sudden flashback of Melanie's body: "Without warning a

[160] In his 1985 essay "Confession and Double Thoughts" Coetzee discusses extensively the series of transgression-confession-repentance-redemption (DP 251-294; see discussion in 5.1.7).

memory of the girl comes back: of her neat little breasts with their upstanding nipples, of her smooth flat belly. A ripple of desire passes through him. Evidently whatever it was is not over yet." (65)

The new circumstances (Lurie's disgrace, Lucy's embeddedness) allow for a new quality in their interactions: "Never before have he and Lucy spoken about his intimate life. It is not proving easy. But if not to her, to whom can he speak?" (69) Lurie quotes Blake on "unacted desires" ("Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.") to justify his affair with Melanie:

> "Every woman I have been close to has taught me something about myself. To that extent they have made me a better person."
> "I hope you are not claiming the reverse as well. That knowing you has turned your women into better people."
> He looks at her sharply. She smiles. "Just joking," she says. (70)

Lucy pinpoints the self-centred nature of his argument, which exclusively considers what his affairs have done to him, and not what they have done to the women. Lucy stands her ground, but doesn't push the matter further, avoiding open conflict. And Lurie accepts her new position and even takes pleasure in the setup, such as when she takes him along to the Saturday market:

> So: a new adventure. His daughter, whom once upon a time he used to drive to school and ballet class, to the circus and the skating rink, is taking him on an outing, showing him life, showing him this other, unfamiliar world. (71)

The reversal of roles is commented on directly by Lurie. The defamiliarisation taking place unsettles Lurie. At first, he remains the sceptical academic, but has already gained a new sense of self which is able to reach out to others mentally more than before. Physically, his encounters with dogs (both on the farm and in the clinic of Bev Shaw) bring about a change in Lurie.

In the following scene Lucy proposes to David activities like cutting meat for the dogs, helping out Petrus and Bev Shaw; the ways he responds illustrate three prominent aspects:

1) Lurie's stubborn refusal to reform his character

> "All right, I'll do it. But only as long as I don't have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself. I'll do it on that basis." (77)

2) The new status of his daughter

> She teases him as her mother used to tease him. Her wit, if anything, sharper. He has always been drawn to women of wit. Wit and beauty. With the best will in the world he could not find wit in Meláni [his preferred pronunciation of her name; the "dark one"]. But plenty of beauty.

> Again it runs through him: a light shudder of voluptuousness. He is aware of Lucy observing him. He does not appear to be able to conceal it. Interesting. (78)

3) The effect of the physical proximity of a dog

> He gets up, goes out into the yard. The younger dogs are delighted to see him: they trot back and forth in their cages, whining eagerly. But the old bulldog bitch barely stirs.
> He enters her cage, closes the door behind him. She raises her head, regards him, lets her head fall again; her old dugs hang slack.
> He squats down, tickles her behind the ears. "Abandoned, are we?" he murmurs. (78)
> He stretches out beside her on the bare concrete. Above is the pale blue sky. His limbs relax. (78)

Resonances with *The Lives of Animals* (1999) are obvious in the last part, which comments on our treatment of animals not as beings in their own right, but as extensions of a household.[161] Lurie's approach towards the bitch Katy shows him as sympathetic as never before. As for Lucy's new status, equivocated with her mother's, Lurie cannot help but be impressed; unfortunately, his desires come into play and tinge the moment of appreciation with a return to his predatory thought patterns.

Lurie's open refusal to "better himself" gains an ironic edge through the following encounter with Katy, which does seem to indicate a reformation of character. Lurie's refusal stems from his strong sense of self, but is prone to undergo changes in the face of a new situation. Maybe Lurie refuses to be changed from without, but inside of him the change has already begun – the decisive difference might be that it happens largely on his own terms. So far, his "own terms" have revolved largely around women and his desire for them. Lurie himself reflects on the shifting of his own terms:

> His own terms, what are they? That dumpy little women with ugly voices deserve to be ignored? A shadow of grief falls over him: for Katy, alone in her cage, for himself, for everyone. He sighs deeply, not stifling the sigh. "Forgive me, Lucy," he says.
> "Forgive you? For what?" She is smiling lightly, mockingly.
> "For being one of the two mortals assigned to usher you into the world and for not turning out to be a better guide. But I'll go and help Bev Shaw. Provided that I don't have to call her Bev. It's a silly name to go by. It reminds me of cattle. When shall I start?" (79)

The "shadow of grief" is a first indicator for his changing attitude – and his grief begins with Katy and extends far beyond himself (to everyone). And this insight immediately leads to a gesture of repentance, when he asks Lucy for forgiveness; transparently his failure as parent is a substitute for a more general self-acquittal regarding his character faults. This early repentance is premature, since Lurie still holds on to his predatory instincts and sexual desire.

Chapter eleven opens with Lucy and Lurie watching three white geese settling on the dam – a moment of shared attention. She marvels over their annual return and her feeling of privilege to be chosen by them as worthy of their visit. Lurie instead imagines a happy

[161] See in particular the account of Barbara Smuts referring her encounters with baboons and her relationship with her dog. ("Reflections," LOA 106-120)

threesome ("a solution of sorts") with Lucy and Melanie or Melanie and Soraya (88) – here he doesn't seem to realize how ridiculous his idea is and how little it takes into consideration the women's own desires and wishes.

After initially good signs of progress in their relationship, the attack on the farm causes a deep crack to emerge, forming a gap between them. For the purpose of my argument, the rape scene itself lends itself to evoke empathy for Lucy and the immediate aftermath puts David's sympathetic imagination and his empathy to the test.

Soon after the attack, when Lucy returns from the bathroom "[…] her hair is combed back, her face clean and entirely blank. He looks into her eyes. 'My dearest, dearest…' he says, and chokes on a sudden surge of tears." (98) Her blankness indicates the posttraumatic stress she experiences but which Lurie cannot grasp. At the close of the chapter, he again holds out his arms to her: "When she does not come, he puts aside his blanket, stands up, and takes her in his arms. In his embrace she is stiff as a pole, yielding nothing." (99) After initially good signs of progress in their relationship, this catastrophic event has torn them apart.

After returning from hospital they get put up by the Shaws. "In the middle of the night he awakes in a state of utmost clarity. He has had a vision: Lucy has spoken to him; her words – 'Come to me, save me!' – still echo in his ears. In the vision she stands, hands outstretched, wet hair combed back, in a field of white light." (103) He immediately gets up to see her; she appears in the doorway of the room she sleeps in and sends him back to sleep: "Lucy is not at all like in the vision. Her face is puffy with sleep, she is tying the belt of a dressing-gown that is clearly not hers." (103) Once again, Lurie acts on intimations of a higher order, only to find reality at odds with his vision – what to him seems a special insight, is to Lucy just an overactive imagination: "She is right, of course. It is three in the morning. But he cannot fail to notice that for the second time in a day she has spoken to him as if to a child – a child or an old man." (103-104) The next morning Lurie asks her about what will happen next, and Lucy states her intention to continue as before, an idea Lurie opposes immediately. But Lucy is adamant: "Sitting up in her borrowed nightdress, she confronts him, neck stiff, eyes glittering. Not her father's little girl, not any longer." (105) Lucy decides to omit the rape from her report to the police. Lurie draws a parallel that marks out their new situation: "Lucy's secret; his disgrace." (109)[162] Though both experienced a traumatic situation, they are unable to draw on the shared experience to strengthen their family bond; and surely being assaulted and being

[162] The phrase could also be read as indicating her rape being his disgrace due to his failure to protect his daughter.

raped are two different matters. Lurie's response is a call for justice, even retribution; and he tries to push Lucy to take action against the three perpetrators. In one argument, he proposes that she might have the notion of repaying a historical debt, postcolonial rape to balance out colonial rape; however, Lucy replies: "You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstraction. Until you make no effort to see that, I can't help you." (112)

Remember Lurie's justification for allowing himself to have an affair with a student of his: the rights of desire, being a servant to Eros. These are terms of abstraction applied in hindsight; in the moment itself he more simply lets himself get carried away. Lucy seems to inhabit a more practical position, her pragmatic priority aimed at a peaceful coexistence with her neighbours. Lurie's failure to imagine her perspective, the failure of his sympathetic imagination and along with this also his failure to empathize, lead to a rupture between him and his daughter: "Never yet have they been so far and so bitterly apart. He is shaken." (112) Being shaken is a good prerequisite for a change of heart, since only then does a mind open itself up to other possibilities, which before might have seemed impossible. But the change is slow to come: "There is a snappishness to Lucy nowadays that he sees no justification for. His usual response is to withdraw into silence. There are spells when the two of them are like strangers in the same house." (124)

Lucy is teaching her father a lesson and asserts her own autonomy. Consequently, she refuses to heed his advice: "*No*. That is Lucy's last word to him." (134; original italics) A gap has opened between them that neither of them can bridge; how they negotiate the gap is a theme that runs through the rest of the narrative. Lurie has a feeling "as if he has been eaten away from inside and only the eroded shell of his heart remains." (156) The task of perspective-taking (Lurie of Lucy) remains the central challenge in the renegotiation of their relationship. Bev Shaw repeats to him that it is impossible for him to imagine what his daughter went through, what she felt and suffered at the hands of the three men:

> You don't understand, you weren't there, says Bev Shaw. Well, she is mistaken. Lucy's intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be a woman? (160)

David Lurie's sympathetic imagination allows him to inhabit the position of the perpetrators, predators like himself (though of a slightly different order, judging by the physical violence applied). But he rightly sees the true challenge in taking a perspective that is not similar to his own in any way. McInturff points out Lurie's rationalist flaw:

> David [Lurie] fails to recognize the extent to which his rational engagement with others in the novel is not sufficient for him to comprehend the experiences, desires, fears, and intentions of others. With this failure, the novel appears to be making a distinction between the capacity and willingness to understand and the capacity and willingness to sympathise. (McInturff 2007: 7)

He writes a letter to his daughter, again urging her not to "humble [her]self before history" (160) and stay on her farm with the permanent threat of the three boys returning. Her reply ("an envelope is pushed under his door") gives a strong impression of her position and her view of her father:

> I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life. All I know is that I cannot go away. [...] You do not see this, and I do not know what more I can do to make you see. It is as if you have chosen deliberately to sit in a corner where the rays of the sun do not shine. I think of you as one of the tree chimpanzees, the one with his paws over his eyes. (161)

The letter exchange does not bring new revelations, but allows both of them to state their position as clearly as they can without direct confrontation, which as we have seen seems to turn sour every time. Again, Lurie senses finality in her reply: "That is their exchange; that is Lucy's last word." (161)

In the following two chapters (Twenty-One and Twenty-Two) Lurie revisits his former urban life, and already we can see how his attitude has changed. He pays a visit to the family of Melanie to offer an apology to the father, who refuses it and instead refers Lurie to the mercy of God. Confused, Lurie undertakes a second attempt, now directed at Melanie Isaacs' mother and her sister, to beg for forgiveness: "With careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor." (173) The apparent awkwardness of how the gesture is offered underscores Lurie's sincerity, but also reveals his insecurity and lacking experience with apologies.

In Cape Town he finds his flat ransacked, which he accepts with humility. He visits his office at the university, which has been cleared except for one poster on the wall: "Superman hanging his head as he is berated by Lois Lane." (177) Such is the brief comic reflection of Lurie's state of mind, as he is forced to adapt his way of thinking to his new circumstances. And we can also see the impact the rural setting has had on him. He misses the geese at the dam. "As for the dogs, he does not want to think about them. From Monday onward the dogs released from life within the walls of the clinic will be tossed into the fire unmarked, unmourned. For that betrayal, will he ever be forgiven?" (178) Lurie's thoughts reach out to others, but still within the frame of his own narrative of confession and repentance.

### 4.1.2 A New Aria – A Change of Heart?

A shift in perspective in his Byron opera reflects David's changing heart. Originally the hero of his opera was meant to be Byron, with Teresa Guccioli as his mistress: "Yet, first on Lucy's farm and now again here, the project has failed to engage the core of him." (181) As a reader one cannot help but think that if he hadn't fallen into disgrace, he might have proceeded with the opera as planned. Now his attention shifts to Teresa (the new Teresa echoes Bev Shaw) and the setting shifts to her home long after Byron's demise: "Can he find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman? Can he love her enough to write a music for her? If he cannot, what is left for him?" (182) Lurie recognizes the importance of the task he is approaching, and puts his mind to task bringing his new Teresa to life in words and music: "That is how it must be from here on: Teresa giving voice to her lover, and he, the man in the ransacked house, giving voice to Teresa. The halt helping the lame, for want of better." (D 183) Two stages of the sympathetic imagination are depicted here. On the level of the text, Teresa brings to life deceased Byron, while on the authorial level Lurie brings to life Teresa (while Coetzee brings to life Lurie).

Lurie also changes the style of the music he imagines for Teresa; grand orchestration is reduced to chamber orchestration and a solitary banjo is added, which he places in the hands of Teresa herself (a small hint at her empowerment). Lurie's own position is also altered, from being a voice piece for Byron and Teresa to inhabiting the reduced music accompanying them:

> He is in the opera neither as Teresa nor as Byron nor even as some blending of the two: he is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings, the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on a line. So this is art, he thinks, and this is how it does work! How strange! How fascinating! (186)

Lurie himself is straining to "soar away" from his own self, but as we could already see his efforts show only little success and slow progress. But more and more David Lurie learns to adapt perspectives outside of himself, as his sympathetic imaginations goes through a variety of challenges: "Teresea leads; page after page he follows." (186)[163]

When Lurie meets his ex-wife she mentions Melanie Isaacs' performance in a theatre play. Lurie falls back into his predatory patterns of thought, recounting all the women he has

[163] "Then one day there emerges from the dark another voice, one he has not heard before, has not counted on hearing." (D 186) He identifies her as the illegitimate daughter of Byron and Teresa, Allegra. Transparently, she echoes his own daughter Lucy – the opera name indicating that she might be the one who speeds up his moral transformation from adagio to allegro. The voice of the child rising from the dark could also be related to Susan Barton's quest for her lost daughter (*Foe*) and likewise to Dostoevsky's quest for his dead son Pavel (*The Master of Petersburg*).

encountered: "*A fair field of folk*: hundreds of lives all tangled with his." (192; original italics) He goes to see the play and again cannot help but imagine Melanie reciprocating his desire. But Melanie's boyfriend Ryan spots him, asks him if he hasn't learnt his lesson, hasn't learnt to stay "with his own kind." (194) The young man adds that Melanie would spit in his eye if she were to see him. Lurie leaves, not hiding his shock about Melanie's presumed hatred for him. The chapter closes with a brief scene where Lurie picks up a prostitute ("*Why not*, he thinks, *on this night of revelations?*" 194; original italics). Despite the changes he has gone through, "solving the problem of sex" does not fail to give him deep satisfaction. It is almost as if Coetzee is reminding the reader that no complete change of character is to be expected from David Lurie. He will not rise from the ashes as a new man, but maybe at least with a changed heart.

From Cape Town Lurie calls Lucy, who reassures him she is doing alright. Alarmed by her tone of voice, he checks with Bev Shaw, who hints at new "developments." (196) Lurie immediately makes a trip to Salem, to "Lucy's farm, Lucy's patch of earth." (197) The welcome he receives strongly contrasts with the first time he came to visit her, before the assault.

> Lucy opens the door wearing a shapeless smock that might as well be a nightdress. Her old air of brisk good health is gone. Her complexion is pasty, she has not washed her hair. Without warmth she returns his embrace. (197)

Lucy immediately reveals to David that she is pregnant from the rape. David cannot hide his surprise and disapproval, to which Lucy reacts strongly:

> You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions. (198)

Metanarrative irony left aside, she once again asserts her autonomy. Lurie checks himself and announces he will support her, quickly aborting the conservation by going for a walk, reflecting on how shaken he is by the news, thinking about the three potential rapist fathers and the unborn child: "Standing against the wall outside the kitchen, hiding his face in his hands, he heaves and heaves and finally cries." (199)

Lucy announces that the boy (Pollux) is a helping hand for Petrus now. Lurie is outraged and again begs Lucy to leave: "He goes to bed with a heavy heart. Nothing has changed between Lucy and himself, nothing has healed. They snap at each other as if he had not been away at all." (200-201) Lurie confronts Petrus about Pollux, and in a surprising turn

Petrus proposes to marry Lucy in order to guarantee her safety. Lurie reports this to Lucy, and Lucy says that she will accept the offer, as long as the house remains hers:

> "Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity."
> "Like a dog."
> "Yes, like a dog." (205)

### 4.1.3 A Dog Life

There is a small variety of animals making an appearance in *Disgrace*, but doubtlessly Lurie's encounters with dogs have the largest impact on him. On his first visit to the farm Lurie notices the bitch Katy having problems defecating and "glancing around shiftily as if ashamed to be watched." (68) Interesting how the first dog he encounters, Katy, puts on a display of shame, whereby she takes part in the moral sphere of humans. No shame without morals.

When he visits Bev Shaw's clinic, he immediately helps holding down a dog that is about to be treated: "The dog gives a tremendous jerk, breaks free of him, almost breaks free of the boy. He grasps it as it scrabbles to get off the table; for a moment its eyes, full of rage and fear, glare into his." (81) This not reflected on by Lurie at this point, but it marks a point of departure in his attitude towards animals, one of which has caught his attention through a look of terror. Bev Shaw attests him a "good presence":

> "I sense that you like animals."
> "Do I like animals? I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them." (81)

Lurie questions her about the putting down of the dogs, asking her if she doesn't mind, to which she replies: "I do mind. I mind deeply. I wouldn't want someone doing it for me who didn't mind. Would you?" (86) Lurie is being initiated into caring for others, regardless of oneself, in spite of oneself, or even because of oneself – a lesson he is not aware of yet.

After the assault Lucy instructs Lurie to bury the dogs that were shot dead. Lurie physically exerts himself on the task of preparing the six graves. Tellingly, he spends no thought on the suffering of the dogs, but instead imagines how it might have felt for the three assailants to shoot them, imagining the exhilaration they might have felt. (110) His sympathetic imagination turns to the cruelty of the perpetrators and leaves aside the suffering of the dogs.

Only two chapters later we see Lurie experiencing pity for two sheep that belong to Petrus and are tethered to the ground with a rather short rope. Lurie shows sympathy with the two sheep intended for slaughter, and for the first time he pays close attention to the animals:

> A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him.
> He stands before them, under the sun, waiting for the buzz in his mind to settle, waiting for a sign.
> There is a fly trying to creep into the ear of one of them. The ear twitches. The fly takes off, circles, returns, settles. The ear twitches again.
> He takes a step forward. The sheep back away uneasily to the limit of its chain.
> He remembers Bev Shaw nuzzling the old billy-goat with the ravaged testicles, stroking him, comforting him, entering into his life. How does she get it right, this communion with animals? Some trick he does not have. One has to be a certain kind of person, perhaps, with fewer complications.
> The sun beats on his face in all its springtime radiance. Do I have to change, he thinks? Do I have to become Bev Shaw? (126)

Recall the stubborn refusal to reform his character discussed earlier. His encounters with animals are an initiation into the realm of empathy. That Lurie is thrown off-balance by this comes as no surprise, and his reasoning fails to deliver a sound explanation for his growing attachment to the sheep.

The lesson of attention-giving is repeated when he retrieves dogs from their kennels at the clinic and leads them to their death. This passage encapsulates his shift of attitude well and deserves to be quoted in full length:

> One at a time he fetches them out of the cage at the back and leads or carries them into the theatre. To each, in what will be its last minutes, Bev gives her fullest attention, stroking it, talking to it, easing its passage. If, more than not, the dog fails to be charmed, it is because of his presence: he gives off the wrong smell (*They can smell your thoughts*), the smell of shame. Nevertheless, he is the one who holds the dog still as the needle finds the vein and the drug hits the heart and the legs buckle and the eyes dim.
> He had thought he would get used to it. But that is not what happens. The more killing he assists in, the more jittery he gets. One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake.
> He does not understand what is happening to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals. Although in an abstract way he disapproves of cruelty, he cannot tell whether by nature he is cruel or kind. He is simply nothing. He assumes that people from whom cruelty is demanded in the line of duty, people who work in slaughterhouses, for instance, grow carapaces over their souls. Habit hardens: it must be so in most cases, but it does not seem to be so in his. He does not seem to have the gift of hardness.
> His whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre. He is convinced the dogs know their time has come. Despite the silence and the painlessness of the procedure, despite the good thoughts that Bev Shaw thinks and that he tries to think, despite the airtight bags in which they tie the newmade corpses, the dogs in the yard smell what is going on inside. They flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they too feel the disgrace of dying; locking their legs, they have to be pulled or pushed or carried over the threshold. On the table some snap wildly left and right, some whine plaintively; none will look straight at the needle in Bev's hand, which they somehow know is going to harm them terribly.
> Worst are those that sniff him and try to lick his hand. He has never liked being licked, and his first impulse is to pull away. Why pretend to be a chum when in fact one is a murderer? But then he relents. Why should a creature with the shadow of death upon it feel him flinch away as if its touch were abhorrent? So he lets them lick him, if they want to, just as Bev Shaw strokes them and kisses them if they will let her.
> He is not, he hopes, a sentimentalist. He tries not to sentimentalize the animals he kills, or to sentimentalize Bev Shaw. (142f)

One clearly senses Lurie's futile resistance to getting emotionally involved. The passage also shows how Lurie begins to empathize with the animals, sensing their discomfort or even terror, allowing them to lick his hand even though he hates it (caring in the sense attributed to Bev Shaw above). Lurie takes on the task of taking the dog bodies to the incinerator, where he refuses to leave them among other waste until the workers come to burn them the next day: "He is not prepared to inflict such dishonour upon them." (144) When he becomes aware of how the workers use shovels to crush the body bags into a fitting shape, he insists on feeding the dead dogs into the incinerator himself (unaware of how much Bev Shaw's spirit has already seeped into him):

> Why has he taken on this job? [...]
> For the sake of the dogs? [...]
> For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing. (145-146)

The compassion Lurie feels for the dogs opens the gates for his sympathetic imagination. He even adopts a phrase from Petrus, calling himself "dog-man":

> Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs. There must be other, more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, or to an idea of the world. [...]
> He saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it. That is what he is becoming: stupid, daft, wrongheaded. (146)

Only slowly is Lurie developing awareness for the changes taking place within him, though it is left to the reader to develop an understanding of how change comes about. The changing self-perception of David Lurie is illustrated in two instructive instances. The first occurs when he visits the Isaacs to offer his apologies:

> He has a vision of himself stretched out on an operating table. A scalpel flashes; from throat to groin he is laid open; he sees it all yet feels no pain. A surgeon, bearded, bends over him, frowning. *What is all this stuff?* growls the surgeon. He pokes at the gall bladder. *What is this?* He cuts it out, tosses it aside. He pokes at the heart. *What is this?* (170; original italics)

In his discussion of Musil (in *Stranger Shores*) Coetzee refers to Musil's nickname "Monsieur Vivisecteur," which points out the psychological precision of his characterizations – a title I believe can be attributed equally well to Coetzee himself. In a sense, Coetzee is the surgeon laying bare the inside of David Lurie, only to find a defect bunch of inner organs, most prominently a useless heart. Important in the context of my argument is how Lurie repeatedly steps out of his own body to regard himself; one form of finding oneself by losing one's self. Later, on his return to Cape Town, he has another vision of himself:

> The end of roaming. What comes after the end of roaming? He sees himself, white-haired, stooped, shuffling to the corner shop to buy his half-litre of milk and half-loaf of bread; he

> sees himself sitting blankly at a desk in a room full of yellowing papers, waiting for the afternoon to peter out so that he can cook his evening meal and go to bed. (175)

This passage reveals little more than the dawning realization of the solitude awaiting him should he fail to develop any sense of community. It is no surprise then that Lurie does not remain in Cape Town, but instead goes back to Lucy's farm, then boards in near-by Grahamstown (211):

> The clinic, more than the boarding-house, becomes his home. In the back of the compound he makes a nest of sorts, with a table and an old armchair from the Shaws and a beach umbrella to keep off the worst of the sun. (211)

Compare this to the previous vision. A "nest of sorts" instead of urban solitude; the bird metaphor doesn't reach very far, but could be taken as an indicator for his approximation to animal life.

> Sitting at his table in the dog-yard, he harkens to the sad, swooping curve of Teresa's plea as she confronts the darkness. This is a bad time of the month for Teresa, she is sore, she has not slept a wink, she is haggard with longing. She wants to be rescued – from the pain, from the summer heat, from the Villa Gamba, from her father's bad temper, from everything. (213)

Remember how Lurie was groping to get a feeling for Teresa Guccioli earlier. Now he seems to effortlessly inhabit her in a nearly prototypical application of his sympathetic imagination.

### 4.1.4 Empathy at Last?

The final chapter of *Disgrace* acts like the coda of a sonata. The main themes are picked up again, related to each other, and ultimately lead to the final chord. It opens with Lurie at work on his opera, moves on to Lucy's new situation on the farm that now belongs to Petrus, and finally ends with the last final passage of a dog.

The chapter opens with a subtle narrative shift. Instead of listening to Lurie's thoughts, we now stand by Teresa Guccioli: "In her white nightdress Teresa stands at the bedroom window. Her eyes are closed. It is the darkest hour of the night: she breathes deeply, breathing in the rustle of the wind, the belling of the bullfrogs." (213) We hear her sing and whisper, we learn about her undying desire for Byron; in short, for the duration of half a page that opens the chapter, we enter the mind of Teresa. After five paragraphs we return to David Lurie in the dog-yard, where he "harkens to the sad, swooping curve of Teresa's plea." (213) In my understanding Coetzee presents a prototypical scene of an author's sympathetic imagination at work. Lurie invest himself wholly into feeling her character, up to the point that he can listen to her as she emerges from his creative consciousness. It is the only moment in the novel where the focalization shifts away from Lurie; symbolically it implies that he has finally managed to move beyond the constraints of his self, which had previously stalled all his

empathy. Lurie has finally managed to lose himself, to fully enter the realm of his imagination in the process of creating this piece of art: "It has become the kind of work a sleepwalker might write."(214)

Lurie's growing affection for the dogs shows how he now sees beyond himself. We learn that Lurie has developed a "particular fondness for […] a young male with a withered left hindquarter which it drags behind." (214f) Even though Lurie makes an effort to keep the level of attachment to a minimum, knowing what the future almost inevitably holds for the dog, the dog takes to him quickly:

> It is not "his" in any sense; he has been careful not to give it a name (though Bev Shaw refers to it as *Driepoot*); nevertheless, he is sensible of a generous affection streaming out toward him from the dog. Arbitrarily, unconditionally, he has been adopted; the dog would die for him, he knows. (215; original italics)

This echoes Lucy's statement earlier in the novel, where she comments on the lack of human gratitude for canine loyalty. The phrasing presented here inverses the usual human-canine partnership; not the dog is adopted, but the dog adopts the man. Driepoot has chosen David Lurie – clearly, his choices were limited (i.e. it was either David or the cage, assuming that Bev Shaw herself was not an option). The term "adoption" implies an educational responsibility in the sense of rearing/taking care of. But how might the dog be able to contribute to Lurie's sentimental education? Can he guide Lurie? It seems that the dog approves of Lurie's new approach to the Byron opera:

> The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo. When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks its head, listens. When he hums Teresa's line, and the humming begins to swell with feeling (it is as though his larynx thickens: he can feel the hammer of blood in his throat), the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, howling.
> Would he dare to do that: bring a dog into the piece, allow it to loose its own lament to the heavens between the strophes of lovelorn Teresa's? Why not? Surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted? (215)

Lurie and the dog pay full attention to the music meant to substantiate Teresa Guccioli. The dog seems willing to contribute with his own voice. And that Lurie considers incorporating the howling into his piece shows how far he has come, how receptive he has become to others.

Lurie's relation to Lucy remains fragile, but both make an effort to get along. In the previous chapter things had come to a head when Lurie catches Pollux spying on Lucy in the shower. Lurie loses his self-control:

> The word still rings in the air: *Swine!* Never has he felt such elemental rage. He would like to give the boy what he deserves: a sound thrashing. Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: *Teach him a lesson, Show him his place*. So this is what it is like, he thinks! This is what it is like to be savage! He gives the boy a good solid kick [...] (206-207; original italics)

The David Lurie we were introduced to in the beginning would hardly have resorted to physical violence. On his emotional journey Lurie has covered quite a distance, and this eruption of violence can be related to the upsurge of emotions he experiences, not all of which are benevolent and kind. Lurie has not turned into a saint, he is far from it; but his emotional consciousness is awakening and affecting him in surprising ways. Lucy, on the other hand, has acquired martyr qualities through her suffering und unrelenting forgiveness – towards Pollux and David! She bears it all, just as she bares herself in front of David and Pollux (literally her towel drops, 207). After Pollux has run off, Lucy admonishes him for his actions, stating that her top priority is to live in peace, which will not be possible if David behaves as he has. Lurie rashly decides to pack his bags, even though that was not what Lucy had asked for – she had merely said that he needed to restrain himself. And in the paragraph following immediately after this confrontation (set apart by a space of one line), we catch a glimpse of Lurie's reflections:

> Hours after the incident his hand still tingles from the blows. When he thinks of the boy and his threats, he seethes with anger. At the same time, he is ashamed of himself. He condemns himself absolutely. He has taught no one a lesson – certainly not the boy. All he has done is to estrange himself further from Lucy. He has shown himself to her in the throes of passion, and clearly she does not like what she sees.
> He ought to apologize. But he cannot. He is not, it would seem, in control of himself. Something about Pollux sends him into a rage: his ugly, opaque little eyes, his insolence, but also the thought that like a weed he has been allowed to tangle his roots with Lucy and Lucy's existence.
> If Pollux insults his daughter again, he will strike him again. *Du must dein Leben ändern!*: you must change your life. Well, he is too old to heed, too old to change. Lucy may be able to bend to the tempest; he cannot, not without honour.
> That is why he must listen to Teresa. Teresa may be the last one left who can save him. Teresa is past honour. She pushes out her breasts to the sun; she plays the banjo in front of the servants and does not care if they smirk. She has immortal longings, and sings in her longings. She will not be dead. (208f)

Undeniably, Lurie's sense of self has undergone subtle but decisive changes. When he meets Lucy at the Saturday market to help out (part of their new agreement) he makes inquiries about Petrus. He asks about new developments regarding her position in Petrus' scheme, offering a general comment about how the child, "a child of this earth" might secure her autonomy; he receives no reply from Lucy:

> There is a long silence between them.
> "Do you love him yet?"
> Though the words are his, from his mouth, they startle him.
> "The child? No, How could I? But I will. Love will grow –one can trust Mother Nature for that. I am determined to be a good mother, David. A good mother and a good person. You should try to be a good person too."
> "I suspect it is too late for me. I'm just an old lag serving out my sentence. But you go ahead. You are well on the way."
> A good person. Not a bad resolution to make, in dark times. (216)

For the first time we see Lurie asking the right question. Most readers should be able to see Lurie's improved character emerge, that is if their sympathetic imagination is alert.

The last encounter of Lucy and Lurie might not tip the scales, but those inclined to see the reformed character he so ardently denies get a chance for closure. Lurie visits Lucy on the farm, unannounced. Still unnoticed, he observes her doing gardening. He ponders her future, the future of the child, his future as grandparent (mingled with a hint at his possible sexual austerity and the apprehensive disappointment about this outlook; the predator remains present in him). At this point, he softly calls her name but is not heard. He continues to wonder what being a grandfather might require of him, what it might entail.

> The wind drops. There is a moment of utter stillness which he would wish prolonged for ever: the gentle sun, the stillness of mid-afternoon, bees busy in a field of flowers; and at the centre of the picture a young woman, *das ewig Weibliche*, lightly pregnant, in a straw sunhat. A scene ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard. City boys like him; but even city boys can recognize beauty when they see it, can have their breath taken away. (218; original italics)

The moment carries epiphanic undertones, similar to the epiphany of Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* or of John in *Youth*. Whereas his previous assessments of his daughter and her lifestyle were ambivalent at best, shifting from dismissive to casual appreciation. Only now is he able to accept a beautiful moment without ruining it, though he registers his surprise about this rural Wordsworthian sentimentality and asks himself: "Is it too late to educate the eye?" (218) He calls her name again and "[t]he spell is broken." (218) She greets him, as does Katy (the third survivor of the earlier assault), and asks him simply:

> "Will you come in and have some tea?"
> She makes the offer as if he were a visitor. Good. Visitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start. (218)

These are Lucy's last words in the narrative – her previous "last words" were meant to end arguments in which her father was imposing his views on her. Lurie seems to have finally accepted her autonomy and is willing to approach her with more care, and she in turn welcomes him in.[164]

### 4.1.5 Giving Him Up

> He and Bev do not speak. He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty calling by its proper name: love.
> He ties the last bag and takes it to the door. Twenty-three. There is only the young dog left, the one who likes music, the one who, given half a chance, would already have lollopped after his comrades into the clinic building into the theatre with its zinc-topped table where

[164] For an alternative appreciation of Lurie's moral evolution see chapter seven in Heinicke 2013.

> the rich, mixed smells still linger, including one he will not yet have met with in his life: the smell of expiration, the soft, short smell of the released soul.
> What the dog will not be able to work out (*not in a month of Sundays!* he thinks), what his nose will not tell him, is how one can enter what seems to be an ordinary room and never come out again. Something happens in this room, something unmentionable: here the soul is yanked out of the body; briefly it hangs about in the air, twisting and contorting; then it is sucked away and is gone. It will be beyond him, this room that is not a room but a hole where one leaks out of existence. (219; original italics)

The man who had earlier claimed to have solved his "sexual problem" now speaks of love. He remembers his exchange with Bev about putting dogs down ("*It gets harder all the time*, Bev Shaw once said." 219; original italics). The narrative opens the imaginative space for the dog's perspective, speculating on how he would react when entering the room where the dogs are put down. The narrative mode subtly shifts from speculation ("would") to a future projection ("will not be able") of the dog's confusion in the face of pending death; by bracketing Lurie's exclamation and marking it as reported thought, the narrative subtly shifts away from Lurie. When it comes to the "unmentionable," the violent description of the soul's departure, marked by a colon, stems from Lurie. Lurie sympathetically imagines the dog's final moment.

He imagines carrying Driepoot (he still avoids the name) to the theatre, imagines in detail the dog's final struggle and how he, Lurie, would "caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle." (219) By embodying the encounter, i.e. emphasizing the physical properties of the agents, Coetzee creates a scene we can vividly imagine. Coetzee delivers another instance of Lurie's sympathetic imagination reaching out, as previously with Teresa Guccioli and with Lucy. Only now the imagination is followed by immediate action, as he informs Bev Shaw that today one more dog will be put down (on top of the planned twenty-three):

> He opens the cage door. "Come," he says, bends open his arms. The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it. "Come."
> Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. "I thought you would save him for another week," says Bev Shaw.
> "Are you giving him up?"
> "Yes, I am giving him up." (220)

Lurie's awakened sympathetic imagination and his actions have finally converged in this moment of loving sacrifice – though admittedly, the dog remains a non-agent in this equation, a stand-in for Lurie's emotional development.[165]

With *Disgrace* Coetzee has created a tableau of how David Lurie's sympathetic imagination becomes active and learns to engage with others empathetically. Initially, David's

[165] For an alternative reading of the scene see Graham 2002.

imagination is largely un-sympathetic, as can be seen in his dealings with Soraya and Melanie. The rape of Lucy and subsequent confrontations initiate a shift in his mindset. Lurie learns to engage empathetically with others, aided by his imaginative conceptualization of Teresa Guccioli and his encounters with animals. Lurie is forced to expand his sympathetic imagination and succeeds within limits.

## 4.2 Slow Man (2005)

With Coetzee's emigration to Australia, the settings of his novels also shift to Australia. *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) marks the beginning of this trend, if only by making the heroine an Australian. *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) are set in Adelaide and Sydney. In the beginning *Slow Man* seems to continue the monologic self-observation of *Disgrace*, again in a contemporary and realist setting. We watch an aging man experiencing a catastrophe when he loses his leg after a bicycle accident. In a cinematic opening scene, simulating a slow-motion moment of last thoughts, we are catapulted into the scene of the accident: "The blow catches him from the right, sharp and surprising and painful, like a bolt of electricity, lifting him up off the bicycle." (SM 1)[166] While David Lurie was the agent of his transgression, Paul Rayment is introduced as the victim of another's transgression. Paul Rayment is not confronted with moral disgrace, instead his physical incapacitation is a source of shame for him. Like David Lurie, Paul Rayment has to recover from shame and learn to care for others again.

For the Cape Town professor a violent attack serves as catalyst, with dogs and his Guccioli opera as crutches for his crippled heart on his way to an open embrace from his daughter Lucy. For Paul Rayment, the caretaker Marijana Jokić and her son Drago remind him of how a heart can reach out to others; his desire for Marijana and a growing sense of fathership towards Drago contribute to an awakening of his sympathetic faculties. In a metafictional twist the author figure Elizabeth Costello appears and seems to fulfil her role as "secretary of the invisible" ("At the Gate," EC 193-225), irritating Paul with her intimate knowledge of particulars about him and everybody else. Costello urges him to drive the stagnating plot on by making advances on Marijana. Rayment stubbornly refuses to be goaded on by Costello. His relationship with the Jokićs remains constrained. In the end, Paul

[166] Coetzee 2005. All quotes in section 4.2 will be from SM unless indicated otherwise.

Rayment is made a peace offer by Elizabeth Costello, who offers to put together their lots. Paul Rayment declines her offer.[167]

Paul Rayment suffers from an internal insufficiency of his sympathetic faculties. His psychological status can be correlated with the amputated leg, as Tim Mehigan notes. Mehigan picks up the trope of the vivisector:

> Coetzee's project might be likened to that of the vivisector, of the surgeon who, with scalpel in hand, probes ever more deeply through layers of tissue in search of the affliction that has brought about the subject's suffering – a suffering hinted at in the novel's title though not explained by it, and a suffering that acquires a visual correlate in the form of the missing leg. (Mehigan 2011: 195)

As with David Lurie, the encounters of Paul Rayment with the Jokićs confront him with the stuntedness of his soul. We see an empathetic budding of his heart in his interactions, though the intrusion of Elizabeth Costello sours affairs. Her observations and comment bring home bitter truths to Paul Rayment, including the final frustration of not being able to follow his desires.

### 4.2.1 Slow Man meets Blind Woman

Elizabeth Costello contrives a meeting of Paul Rayment with a blind woman named Marianna, who was mentioned earlier in the narrative and who is then brought up by Costello later as a possible surrogate for Paul's desires: "The woman I mentioned, Marianna, the blind one – you can't keep her from your thoughts, can you? Don't dissemble, Paul, I can read you like a book." (101) She states place and time of appointment, bidding him to dress up for the occasion. "Don't ask me how I do these things, it's not magic, I just do them." (ibid.) As in *Elizabeth Costello*, we are presented with a lesson. Costello's pastes flour and water over the eyes of Paul, fixed by lemon leaves and a silk stocking, claiming that Marianna has insisted: "I'm sorry it is so complicated, but that is how we human beings are, complicated, each in our own unique way." (102) Before she leaves, Costello reminds him of the required payment. Now the scene of the slow man made blind to meet the blind woman unfolds:

> "I am here," he says into the dark. Despite his unbelief, his heart seems to be hammering.

[167] David Atwell relates *Slow Man* to the middle voice (as discussed by Roland Barthes):

1. It is a *dialogic* space, a space of countervoices; the self-of-writing is not unified but acts as a chorus, testing a range of positionalities rather than attempting unity (in this reading, the Nobel Lecture, "He and His Man," is embryonic of *Slow Man*).
2. It is dialogic in part because the principal functions of being/acting and writing have different relationships with *desire* (Marijana/Marianna: the former is the object of Rayment's desire, the latter represents Costello's desire for a tidy story involving the halt and the blind).
3. The authorial subject-of-writing (Costello) trades in the literary system (intertextuality, allusions, illusion) whereas the existential subject-of-writing pulls away from the literary (Rayment repudiates Costello at the end of the novel). (Atwell 2011: 16)

> A gliding, a rustling. The scent of the damp leaves over his eyes overpower every other smell. (102)

Deprived of his visual sense, Paul Rayment becomes even more helpless than before. He now co-experiences what Marianna goes through. After her fingers have explored his face, he asks to hear her voice: "She clears her throat, and already in the high, clear tone he can hear that she is not Marijana Jokić: lighter, more a creature of air." (103) His comparison shows that she is but a substitute for the object of his desire. He is reminded that this experiment was set up by Elizabeth Costello, and "on the back of his neck he can feel it." (103) While Elizabeth Costello's ontological status remains incidental and uncertain, the reader is the one continuously breathing down the neck of Paul Rayment. Now it is Paul who explores Marianna with his touch; "Uncertainly he stretches out a hand." (104) As clumsy as he might behave, the careful and sensitive interaction is touching. Paul Rayment draws her close, but senses how the awkwardness of the situation inhibits them: "[B]etween where they are, man and woman, and the exercise of lust a veritable chasm lies. 'There is no need,' he begins again, 'for us to adhere to any script. No need to do anything we do not wish. We are free agents.'" (105) As they proceed, Paul tries to imagine how she looks: "The image he has of her comes only from the lift and from what his fingers tell him now. To her he must be even more a jumble of sense-data: the cold of his hands, the roughness of his skin; the rasp of his voice, and an odour probably unpleasing to her supersensitive nostrils." (106f) Early in the encounter he noted a slight trembling in her, which by now has affected him: "The woman's trembling has not ceased. He can swear it has affected him too: a light trilling of the hand that might be put down to age but it is in fact something else, fear or anticipation (but which?)." (107) The discourse of Costello (from *Elizabeth Costello*) invades his thoughts:

> Eros. Why does the sight of the beautiful call eros into life? Why does the spectacle of the hideous strangle desire? Does intercourse with the beautiful elevate us, make better people of us, or is it by embracing the diseased, the mutilated, the repulsive that we improve ourselves? What questions! Is that why the Costello woman has brought the two of them together: not for the vulgar comedy of a man and a woman with parts of their bodies missing doing their best to interlock, but in order that, once the sexual business has been gotten out of the way, they can hold a philosophy class, lying in each other's arms discoursing about beauty, love, and goodness? (108)

The narrative moves on to announce the completion of the act "in all its natural parts." (109) Reminding himself of Costello's description of Marianna, Paul expresses relief that "the hunger or thirst raging in her body" remains subdued:

> Whatever is going on inside her she keeps to herself; [...] The sole intimation he has of either raging thirst or raging hunger comes in the form of an unusual but not unpleasing heat at the core of her body, as though her womb or perhaps her heart were glowing with a fire of its own. (109)

The inwardness of Marianna finds expression in Rayment's bodily assessment of her passions. Rayment questions her about her relationship with Elizabeth Costello, receiving only vague answers. Rayment puts forward his suspicions about Costello up-staging them as "[t]he halt leading the blind." (111) Rayment records how Marianna stiffens after this remark, registers her discomfort: "He hears the lips part, hears her swallow, and all of a sudden she is crying." (111) Saying he is sorry he "reaches out to touch her cheek." The reader witnesses how Rayment struggles to empathize with the blind woman on his couch; but his failure results from a lack of self-empathy; not being emotionally in touch with himself inhibits his sensibility towards others. Costello might have intended to teach him a lesson about how impairments open new epistemological spaces in which interpersonal relationships may continue to flourish. However, Rayment continues to think poorly of himself (and Marianna): "Two lesser beings, handicapped, diminished: how could she [Costello] have imagined a spark of the divine would be struck between them, or any spark at all." (113) And indeed, the "biologic-literary experiment" (114) evoked no sparks, and the moment Marianna leaves he attempts to tear off the blindfold only to find the paste has caked and hardened, meaning he will have to soak it off.

In this chapter Coetzee imagines how sensory deprivation might affect an encounter. The most prominent effect is a heightened attention directed towards the other, puzzling together the remaining sensory data. While not being able to detect emotions on her face, Rayment instead reads her bodily sounds and posture. He senses her tears, her discomfort, but is caught up in projecting and extending his self-pity. As he pities himself for having lost a leg, he pities her for having lost her sight. While pity provides a fertile ground for compassion to evolve, it leaves little room for romantic sentiments; and more importantly in the context of my argument, pity does not promote empathy, since an asymmetrical self-other distinction is reinforced and inhibits empathetic approximation.

Though Rayment attempts to rashly end this episode by regaining his sight, the paste applied by Costello refuses to wash off easily. The effect of her experiment lingers on, in spite of Rayment's stubborn refusal to give in to Costello's promptings. Rayment displays an under-developed sympathetic imagination, and the scene discussed above proves it. But the arena Costello has ordained him forces him to engage with others and repeatedly tests his limits, most obviously expressed in his doubts about Costello's role in all of this. Large parts of the second half of the novel are dedicated to this metafictional stunt, with Rayment (the character) imagining what Costello (character/author) is up to, guessing at her motives and aims. In a moment of frustration he complains: "'You treat me like a puppet,' he complains.

‘You treat everyone like a puppet. You make up stories and bully us into playing them out for you. You should open a puppet theatre, or a zoo.’” (117)

While *Slow Man* picks up prominent themes of *Disgrace*, such as fatherhood and male sexual desire, the metafictional slant of the narrative shifts the quality of encounters. The reader can sense the author’s strong presence, mitigated slightly by the introduction of Elizabeth Costello. This shift of emphasis diminishes the impact of Coetzee’s sympathetic imagination and complicates the development of a sympathetic imagination in the characters, which often appear to be puppets in the hands of an author, as Rayment indicates in the quote above. The scene of blind Marianna and Rayment, and Paul’s discussion with Costello in the following chapter, illustrates well how contrived the plot is. The scene is a literary case study, but only barely succeeds in teasing the reader’s sympathetic imagination into action.

### 4.2.2 Infinite Responsibility

Paul Rayment’s entanglement with the Jokić family offers various instances in which the sympathetic imagination of the characters is asked for. But the title of the novel already indicates that no speedy initiation is to be expected from Paul Rayment. In a conversation between Elizabeth Costello and Drago Jokić, she invites him to “[c]onsider the situation from [his]mother’s viewpoint” (140), but the perspective-taking is not followed up by young Drago. Instead, Costello almost conclusively sums up their situation: “Four people in four corners, moping, like tramps in Beckett, and myself in the middle, wasting time, being wasted by time.” (141) Drago Jokić, his mother Marijana Jokić, Elizabeth Costello and Paul Rayment form the unlikely companions that ultimately cannot come together.

What remains strong is the underlying notion of regarding people as equally complex beings worth of care and attention. This pertains to all four major characters, but also to complementary characters such as Marianna. Mike Marais in his reading proposes that the text urges the reader to surpass the efforts made by the characters in engaging with each other: “[…] the reader’s task is not a finite *task* but an infinite *responsibility*. Like the previous novels, this work attempts to pass to the reader the burden of responsibility for completing a task that its characters and author have failed to fulfill.” (Marais 2009: 216; original italics) Even more than *Disgrace* this novel primarily illustrates the failure of the sympathetic imagination in the encounters of the characters, which right until the very end remain dissonant and apart from each other.

In the final chapter Drago presents to Paul a recumbent bicycle, which Paul accepts politely while he secretly thinks that he will never make use of. Paul Rayment desperately

holds on to a self-image he had before the accident, having failed to come to terms with the loss of his leg. Now he considers becoming a "figure of fun" (256), and Costello playfully titles him her "knight of the doleful countenance," a modern day Don Quixote holding on to his past. Fittingly, Rayment receives a first smile from Ljuba, the youngest Jokić, as she jokes about him not being a rocket man but a slow man. (258)

In the final conversation of Paul Rayment and Elizabeth Costello, she proposes to him a shared livelihood in Melbourne, with her as "faithful old Dobbin." (260)[168] Paul suggests she should turn to her children for care, or alternatively to look for "mere good nursing," but Costello rejects this and instead claims to desire "loving care." (261) Paul Rayment states that he lacks the "loving hands" required, to which Costello curtly replies: "No, you do not. Neither loving hands nor a loving heart. A heart in hiding, that is what I call it. How are we going to bring your heart out of hiding? – that is the question." (261) A concern central to the entire narrative, but with little signs of promise. Rayment considers her proposal:

> He puts on his glasses again, turns, takes a good look at her. In the clear late-afternoon light he can see every detail, every hair, every vein. He examines her, then he examines his heart. "No," he says at last, "this is not love. This is something else. Something less." (263)

With these words and three kisses on her cheek he dismisses her. The difference between "loving care" and "good nursing," between "love" and "something less" will be explored more fully in *The Childhood of Jesus*. Coetzee embeds the literary characters of David Lurie and Paul Rayment in realistic social contexts, shifting emphasis from the sympathetic imagination of the individual in encountering others to the social limitations of the sympathetic imagination's application. *Disgrace* with its strong focus on David Lurie and a series of cataclysmic events affecting him provides a range of occasions for Lurie's inner development. In *Slow Man* one cataclysmic event opens the narrative, but in the end Paul Rayment's "doggedness" (Costello about Rayment, 263) prevails and prevents his sympathetic imagination form unfolding and evolving to a level that enhances empathy. Mike Marais notes the shift from the personal to the social context: "What is at stake in *Slow Man*'s bid to affect the reader is therefore an attempt to extend the scope of ethical concern to everyone irrespective of identity." (Marais 2009: 217)

[168] Continuing the Don Quixote allusion, Costello proposes to become his Rosinante, here supplanted by Francis Fawkes' poem (1761) about late Dobbin, the horse of a butterwoman who "is no more." (Fawkes 1810) The Dobbin of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) was similarly exemplary in his faithfulness to Amelia, whom he marries in the end.

# 5. The Autobiographical Fictions 1997-2009

> An autobiography is the truest of all books; for though it inevitably consists mainly of extinctions of the truth, shirkings of the truth, partial revealments of the truth, with hardly an instance of plain straight truth, the remorseless truth *is* there, between the lines, where the author-cat is raking dust upon it, which hides from the disinterested spectator neither it nor its smell… the result being that the reader knows the author in spite of his wily diligences.
>
> (Mark Twain in a letter to William Dean Howells, quoted in Abbott 2002: 63)

J.M. Coetzee has by now published three book-length autobiographical fictions,[169] starting with *Boyhood* in 1997, continuing with *Youth* in 2002 and culminating in *Summertime* in 2009. *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) is not strictly speaking an autobiographical fiction, but a formal experiment with split-page presentation of polyphonic narratives and essays. As in *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee creates a proxy character, now Señor C, to present these opinions. The opinions expressed by him transparently resemble those one would expect of Coetzee. The sympathetic imagination of the reader is challenged more by the format than the actual encounter with the characters. The implied author draws back the curtain to reveal more of himself. The format of *Diary of a Bad Year* prepares the ground for the polyphonic self-refraction enacted in *Summertime*, which presents again a complicated autobiographical fictionalization.

## 5.1 The Autobiographical Project – "All the facts are too many facts"

In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee speaks of all his fictions and essays (!) as possibly being part of a larger "autobiographical project." While demarcating his writing as emerging from his personal life experience, Coetzee remains vague when it comes to formulating the aim of this larger project. In "Remembering Texas" he speaks of "finding his own voice" (see 5.1.6). In regard to the truth value of the enterprise, Coetzee vaguely hints at a personal truth to be discovered through writing, while at the same time denying the attainability of truth as such. De Reuck comments on Coetzee's disavowal of autobiographical truth in an interview with David Atwell:

> Coetzee, however, has argued that this difference is not as large as it seems: "Among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that [all writing] yields, are there any that are

[169] In a public reading from the completed manuscript of *Youth*, Coetzee comments on negotiating genre classification with his publisher (memoir or fiction?), asking "whether it could not hover in-between". But for practical reasons (bookshops have sections) it would have to be either or; so *Youth* was marketed in the US as fiction and in Britain as biography. In the consequent discussion with Peter Sacks, both of them speak without hesitation about the character and the author as if they were identical; in his introductory note Coetzee speaks of the boy depicted in *Boyhood* (the prequel to *Youth*) as "a child with my name, with my birth date." (J.M. Coetzee with Peter Sacks, 8 November 2001, youtube)

> truer than others?" (1992, 17). He goes on to question the possibility of simple "truth to fact": [autobiography] is a kind of self-writing in which you are constrained to respect the facts of your history. But which facts? All the facts? No. All the facts are too many facts. You choose the facts insofar as they fit in with your evolving purpose" (1992, 18). (De Reuck 1988: 158)

I take one "evolving purpose" in Coetzee's work to be the concept of the sympathetic imagination and its application in literature. In the previous chapters I have shown how this concept works in his fictions. With the autobiographical fictions, the concept comes full circle and is reapplied by the author to himself. Previously, the fictions had depicted the engagement of others with others. Now, Coetzee's fictions depict his own engagement with his past, becoming manifest in the third-person characters representing former selves of Coetzee, though not in a straight-forward way of autobiographies claiming to be "objective" history – i.e. telling us what really happened.

In *Youth* the young man John reflects on Gustave Flaubert's heroine Emma Bovary (*Madame Bovary*, 1856), suggesting her origins lie in the author's experience and have then been subjected to the "transfiguring fire of art." (Y 25) With the flick of a wrist, the text shifts to today's readers of Flaubert's classic, in particular the female readers, who are "transformed into versions of her. They may not be the real Emma but in a sense they are her living embodiment." (Y 25) In this casual observation, made by a young man, we find all the ingredients of how the sympathetic imagination might transpire fiction. Flaubert employed his sympathetic imagination to create Emma; the readers follow the lead of the author and empathetically engage with Emma Bovary. Depth of character is required to evoke empathy; on the surface Emma Bovary might seem little more than a bored housewife, but the intimate account of her emotional states turns her into a heroine for many impassioned readers.

Flaubert is believed to have said: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." Coetzee's autobiographical fictions point in an opposite direction: In none of the three fictions do we hear the author saying: the young boy/man John is/was me. Coetzee presents almost generic types – clouded by the close similarity with the author's biography, whose historical authenticity might only be distinguished as erratic by the reader of a biography of Coetzee. The characters of *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime* have their origins in the author's life, but before becoming text have been subjected to the "transfiguring fire" of Coetzee's self-sympathetic imagination. The result is quite the opposite from Flaubert's playful dictum on his identification with Emma Bovary, and Coetzee ranges closer to Arthur Rimbaud, as Steven Kellmann notes (see above p. 21). When Coetzee and David Atwell spoke of "autrebiography" in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee might have already envisioned a revisiting of his childhood and youth. His three autobiographical fictions (in allusion to Flaubert's

*Moeurs de la Provence* subtitled "Scenes from Provincial Life") may be read as autobiographical in the traditional meaning only by a naïve reader.[170] Looking closer, one will see how the genre itself is undermined, in so far as Coetzee pointedly refuses to convey a coherent and ultimate truth. The texts force us to acknowledge the transmission of a perspective onto the world from author to reader: the boy John is in search of a cultural identity beyond apartheid; the young man John is in search of the spark that will ignite his artistic fireworks; and lastly, the dead man John, given to us in notebook fragments (a fake diary) and interviews (with largely non-existing people who supposedly knew Coetzee) offering five exterior perspectives on Coetzee (or on encountering him). What is presented to the reader is not the "real" Coetzee, but nonetheless a realized perspective that feeds on his biography. These three acts of the sympathetic imagination of Coetzee allow us (and him) to engage with him (or rather his fictional selves) in a spirit of empathy.

## 5.2 Remembering and Confessing: Coetzee and Autobiography 1984-1985

Coetzee's interest in the genre of autobiography can be dated back to his inaugural lecture "Truth and Autobiography" at the University of Cape Town in 1984, an essay that prepared the ground for his seminal essay "Confession and Double Thought: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (1985), which was later included in *Doubling the Point* (1992), as was the short autobiographical piece "Remembering Texas" (1984). A discussion of these earlier texts will help understand Coetzee's outlook onto the genre of autobiography.

### 5.2.1 "Remembering Texas" (1984)

In "How I learned about America – and Africa – in Texas" (*New York Times Book Review*, 15 April 1984; later retitled "Remembering Texas") Coetzee gives an account of his three-year stay in the United States of America. The narrative voice establishes its position of retrospection in the opening paragraph: "In September 1965 (this is an essay that can begin in no other way), I sailed into New York harbor aboard an Italian ship […]." (DP 50) [171] The first person narration establishes a personal tone, while the past tense leaves the reader (and the author) at a retrospective distance to events described. The comment added in parentheses reminds the reader of the textual construction underlying this autobiographical sketch.

[170] Sue Kossew has provided a comprehensive discussion of all three autobiographical fictions (Kossew 2011).
[171] The opening paragraph in *Elizabeth Costello* similarly marks the construction of the narrative voice, only without marking the manoeuvre with parentheses as here.

Coetzee styles himself as coming from the colonies ("where I came from ultimately") where he had received a "patchy imitation of Oxford English studies." (50) This self-stylisation is reinforced when he describes playing cricket "with a group of Indians" against a team "also made up of nostalgic castoff children from the colonies." (51) Arriving by boat in New York in 1965 is emblematic of immigration. Coetzee compares Austin, Texas, to South Africa ("hotter and steamier than the Africa I remembered", 50), reversing the cliché climate summarization often applied to Africa by visitors from abroad. In a later reminiscence of feeling estranged by the Surrey countryside in England (51), Coetzee thoughts reach back to South Africa, who's landscape has imprinted itself on him: "What I missed seemed to be a certain emptiness, empty earth and empty sky, to which South Africa had accustomed me. What I also missed was the sound of a language whose nuances I understood." (52) Some of these nuances and Coetzee's appreciation of them find their expression in *Boyhood*, as does his deep attachment to the Karoo.

The essay switches between university life and more general reflections. The electrifying encounter with Samuel Beckett's *Watt* (51; also to be found in *Youth*) and some thoughts about literary genius are followed by the juxtaposition of a spree killer at the university, the assassination of H.F. Verwoerd in Cape Town, abruptly leading on to a conversation about the on-going Vietnam War. The narrative changes into quoted speech, citing an unnamed friend asking him why he doesn't leave the US if he dislikes the war so much. The narrative changes back into its previous register of recorded reflections:

> But he misread me. Complicity was not the problem – complicity was far too advanced a notion for the time being. The problem was with knowing what was being done. It was not obvious where one went to escape knowledge. (51)

Complicity has been extensively explored by Coetzee in the characters such as the Magistrate, Elizabeth Curren, and David Lurie, to name only the more prominent examples. At this point in his life – a PhD student in Austin, Texas – he is unwilling to openly face the grim reality (of killing in general) presented to him, but wishes to "escape knowledge." While at the same time his studies about the linguistic history of the Cape languages Nama, Malay, and Dutch lead him into an imaginative reflection on the imperial minds of an early Cape colonizer and a war strategist:

> […] and then followed the fortunes of the Hottentots in a history written not by them but for them, from above, by travelers and missionaries, not excluding my remote ancestor Jacobus Coetzee, *floruit* 1760. Years later, in Buffalo still pursuing this track, I was to venture my own contribution to the history of the Hottentots: a memoir of a kind that went on growing till it had been absorbed into a first novel, *Dusklands*. (52; original italics)

The imagined memoir, *Dusklands*, drew its force from the immediacy of the first person narrators Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, underscored by their strong physical presence in the text. In "How I learned about America – and Africa – in Texas" the body is largely absent, not even cricket occasions a remark or even action beyond "played" and "lost." In this essay the reader joins the author Coetzee in looking back at a portion of the past with today's hindsight, without slipping into his shoes. When he hypothetically favours the last speaker of Djerbal (Australian language), wilfully proposing her to be "a fat old woman who scratched herself and smelled bad," over the works of Beethoven and Shakespeare, Coetzee privileges indigenous over dominant culture:

> It seemed an odd position for a student of English, the greatest imperial language of them all, to be falling into. It was a doubly odd position for someone with literary ambitions, albeit of the vaguest – ambitions to speak one day, somehow, in his own voice – to discover himself suspecting that language spoke people or at the very least spoke through them. (53)

We note the narrative's subtle change to a third person perspective by shifting the subject to "a student of English" and then "someone with literary ambitions." While the narrative moves away from the first person perspective into third person narration, the following content expresses a central dilemma of autobiographical writing: how to speak in one's own voice, and when one finally does, how much sincerity is a narrative capable of? The notion of "language speaking people" or "speaking through them" complicates the matter by delegating responsibility to the domain of language. And yet "Remembering Texas" gives the reader no cause to doubt the sincerity of Coetzee as narrator.

"Remembering Texas" and "Truth in Autobiography" were written in the same year. The fiction informs the criticism and vice versa. The essay for the *New York Times Book Review* seems like a test-run for autobiographical writing. Coetzee briefly summarizes his three-year-stay, alternating reported events with reflections that reach beyond the mere facts – whether these reflections are retrospectively arrived at or recall actual thoughts of the young man Coetzee remains unclear.

### 5.2.2 "Truth in Autobiography" (1984)[172]

J.M. Coetzee opens his inaugural lecture with an offering of a tentative definition of autobiographical writing:

> Autobiography is a kind of writing in which you tell the story of yourself as truthfully as you can, or as truthfully as you can bear to. Autobiography is usually thought of not as a kind of fiction-writing but as a kind of history-writing, with the same allegiance to the truth as history has. (1)

[172] All quotes in this section will be taken from "Truth and Autobiography" unless indicated otherwise.

This stands in stark contrast to the traditional definition of autobiography as given by Phillippe Lejeune, who defined it as "retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence." (Lejeune 1989: 4) For Coetzee truthfulness is a central concern, though he trusts neither the discourse of history nor that of the novel, as he expressed eloquently at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town during the Weekly Mail Book Week in 1988: "The categories of history are not privileged, just as the categories of moral discourse are not privileged." (Coetzee 1988a: 4) Both history and novels are "nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other." (Coetzee 1988a: 4) Truthfulness no longer relies on mere factuality but on the personal unflinching self-investedness in the process of producing such truths.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously opened his *Confessions* with the claim of presenting himself "in all the truth of nature." (1) Rousseau intends to guide his readers to "some kind of intuitive understanding" as opposed to an "analytical understanding." (2) Coetzee is not on a fact-finding mission about the misgivings of Rousseau, but rather interested in the mechanics of confession in autobiographical writing and their relation to shame and truthfulness. Coetzee points out how Rousseau makes use of shameful deeds to present himself in a favourable light of a repenting sinner (a strategy which of course he explicitly denies); this brings us to the heart of the matter: the best intentions do not necessarily yield the most truthful results.

With precision Coetzee unveils Rousseau's "economy of confession," where "everything shameful is valuable: every secret or shameful appetite is confessable currency." (3) Not the self is at risk in the disclosure of shameful events, but the textual medium transmitting the narrative ("the goose that lays the golden eggs", 3). Because autobiography is by definition a retrospective genre (or else it were science fiction), "an autobiographer can be said to be *making* the truth of his life." (4; original italics) And Rousseau has proved himself master in creating an autobiography that stands the test of time and is read until today.

Coetzee identifies two central categories for evaluating autobiographical truthfulness: *authenticity* as trademark of Rousseau's commitment to his enterprise; and "[…] *sincerity*, which I define as the immediate presence of the moral self to the self." Adding: "Surely whatever is written in a spirit of sincerity is, in some sense, true." (4; original italics) While the first category does not necessarily increase the truth value of narrated events (think of Peer Gynt's grand tone of authenticity, but total lack of truthfulness), the category of sincerity implies "moral self-knowledge of the autobiographer" (4); it requires the author to be able to access an external perspective in regard to himself, otherwise he would not be able to evaluate his moral self, which can only be moral in relation to others. First-person narration bars all

access to other perspectives, since it is forced to remain within the parameters of its own narration – it can assess other perspectives, but not access them. A third person narration, as used by Coetzee in all his book-length autobiographical fictions, allows both the reader and the author an outside perspective onto the protagonist, allowing the character's moral self to emerge more clearly than it could in a first-person narration.

The final category regarding autobiographical truth is *privilege* (6), and in the case of first person narratives the privilege resides solely with the author – similar to the privilege assumed by critics in assessing works of fiction. The privileging of the central consciousness denies the narrative access to any truth hidden behind the mask put on display by the self, hailed as its "own truth". Only the third person narration creates a chance for a deeper truth to emerge. Coetzee's three autobiographical fictions attest to the author's desire to circumvent the truth-claim inherent in most autobiographies by adopting third person narration. Hereby the subject of the text (an earlier I now presented as He) is made non-identical with the author (the present I). In his discussion of Rousseau's cake-shop episode, Coetzee points out the necessity of looking "beneath the surface" of past events, and "write down an explanation which may be full of gaps and evasions but at least gives a representation of the motions of your mind as you try to understand yourself," in which case the "lies and evasions may be more interesting than the visit itself." (4) Coetzee compares this to one model of psychoanalysis: "The patient's lie becomes the analyst's truth." (4) The commitment to presenting a full account of past events and including reflections on the lies and evasions involved in the depiction amounts to what Coetzee terms *authenticity*.

### 5.2.3 "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (1985)

The seminal essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky"[173] begins by discussing the *Confessions* of Augustine (398 CE), in particular the episode of stealing pears from a neighbour's garden (just as "Truth in Autobiography" had opened with Rousseau's stealing of cake. Only now, shame and desire are linked to each other more closely, one fuelling the other (DP 251)). Coetzee shifts his discourse from the genre of autobiography to that of confession, which could either be considered a sub-genre ("a mode of autobiographical writing," 252) or a crucial component of any autobiography that claims to be authentic and sincere (with an "underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self,"

[173] All quotes in the following will be from DP unless indicated otherwise.

252). In the case of Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's autobiographical writings Coetzee refers to "confessional fictions." (252)

Coetzee identifies a fundamental sequence resulting from unchecked desire and subsequent shame: "Confession is one component in a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution." (251) In the case of Augustine, the confession aims at not only stating the act of transgression, but also at revealing the author's motives. Augustine himself realizes the conundrum, and Coetzee summarizes: "The truth about the self that will bring an end to the quest for the source within the self for that-which-is-wrong, he affirms, will remain inaccessible to introspection." (252)

Interestingly, Coetzee switches to a first person narration to relate to the reader "Pozdnyshev's Truth" (section heading), followed by a more neutral third person account of "Tolstoy's Truth" (as stated by the author Tolstoy in an "Afterword" responding to letters from readers). These two "truths" are followed by a third, which Coetzee scrupulously avoids tagging as coming from Pozdnyshev's "I" (more essential than the "I" presented in the narrative). Coetzee presents a psychoanalytical reading of events, marking it as one possible reading (but not subscribing to the radical possibility of "an infinity of interpretations"; 257). The double meaning of the confession marks it as an "ironic" confession (257), in which the face value of the narrative serves to point to what is hidden beneath the surface. But, the irony only emerges in a critical reading bent on finding it in the first place, otherwise Coetzee attests a "lack of reflectiveness" (258) to the narrative and its presentation of Pozdnyshev's "truth-embodying selfhood." (260)

Coetzee discusses the converted self of the narrator and the "truth-bearing" of his retrospective account of events, taking into account Tolstoy's afterword as well as his personal history, which includes the earlier publication "A Confession" (259-260, see also DP endnote 13, p. 420). The conversion described by Tolstoy leads him from secular nihilism to religious faith. In passing, Coetzee remarks on how Tolstoy avoided the more "conventional kind of language" which proposes a "false self" (of reason) converting to a "true self" (of the heart) – a discourse that could well be read into Coetzee's fictions, only without a clear dichotomy and ultimately without a final self to arrive at. Instead, like with Tolstoy, "the self is a site where the will goes through its processes in ways only obscurely accessible through introspection." (261) While the teleology of Tolstoy's confession points to God, Coetzee's soul-searching in his autobiographical fictions (all of which have a confessional undertone) provides no closure, but results in an "endless knot of self-awareness": "Because the basic movement of self-reflexiveness is a doubting and questioning movement, it is in the nature of the truth told to

itself by the reflecting self not to be final." (263) What both authors share, and what Coetzee points out in his discussion of Tolstoy, is "not perfect self-knowledge but truth-directedness," to be achieved by "attentiveness and responsiveness to an inner impulse." (261)

Attentiveness and responsiveness are to be found in all of Coetzee's fictions, and both are necessary prerequisites for the sympathetic imagination and empathy to be triggered. In the case of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee both these qualities are directed at a truth fabricated by themselves, whereas in later characters the attentiveness and responsiveness to others initiate transformations of the self. In the case of the autobiographical fictions, both categories are applied to an earlier self of the author, only without any transformation resulting from them. The hallmark of a successful application of attentiveness and responsiveness (to the self) is sincerity, in the ongoing argument now illustrated by Tolstoy's story "The Death of Ivan Ilyich": "The sense of urgency that the crisis brings about, the relentlessness of the process in which the self is stripped of its comforting fictions, the single-mindedness of the quest for truth: all these qualities enter into the term *sincerity*." (262)

With recourse to Paul De Man and Jean Starobinski, Coetzee comes to the preliminary conclusion that Rousseau's "self-revelations in fact always have in view the goal of winning love and acceptance. Self-revelation offers the truth of the self, a truth that others might be persuaded to see." (267) This act of persuasion requires a language to be invented that can "render the unique savor of personal experience." (268) The position of retrospection is also reflected directly in Rousseau's text: "Yielding myself simultaneously to the memory of the impression I received [in the past] and to present feeling, I will give a twofold depiction of [*je peindrai doublement*] the state of my soul." (Quoted by Coetzee in DP 268; comments by Coetzee) At this point follows a distinction of *authenticity* as producing an "own truth" and *being oneself* (with no distance between present and past self) and *sincerity* (with a reflective distance to the past): "one is in danger of not being oneself when one lives at a reflective distance from oneself (a revealing reversal of values for autobiography)." (268)

Coetzee's own autobiographical texts celebrate the reflective distance between present self (author) and past self (subject of narrative). Just as the presently discussed essay ultimately "brings the notion of *the* truth into question (272, original italics), so do Coetzee's autobiographical fictions avoid proposing any conclusive truth about the person J.M. Coetzee. They are marked as inventions by additions and omissions to the biographical facts,[174] nonetheless providing enough "confessable currency" (272) to maintain the text's sincerity,

[174] The biographical facts have been made available to critics in biographies first by Manfred Loimeier (2007), then more comprehensively by J.C. Kannemeyer (2012).

while neglecting the category of authenticity – the text clearly demarcates the non-identity of author and protagonist. This is achieved most obviously by employing third person present tense narration, but also by not imposing a retrospective perspective of the later self onto the earlier self. This process could be described as confessing with an "open mind," acknowledging the impossibility of attaining truth, "[b]ut there is something literally shameless in this posture." (274) In his autobiographical fictions Coetzee might have attempted to circumvent this shamelessness through the narrative strategy of using third person present tense, avoiding "a regression to infinity of self-awareness and self-doubt." (274) The question remains whether Coetzee has successfully avoided these by emphasizing the fictional character of the narrative.

The text moves on to a discussion of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. While Dostoevsky's narrator claims to "outdo Rousseau in truthfulness, [...] his confession reveals nothing else but the desire of the self to construct its own truth." (279) Coetzee in his autobiographical fictions openly embraces the desire to construct his own truth, knowingly and willingly. Paradoxically, the sincerity of the text is heightened, while its authenticity is relegated to the fictional, and the identity of author and character becomes a question of the second order, ontologically speaking. In *Notes from the Underground* the narrator's claim to truthfulness is doomed to fail in view of his "hyperconsciousness" (Dostoevsky's term):

> Self-consciousness will not give him the answer, for self-consciousness in *Notes from the Underground* is a disease. What is diseased about it is that it feeds upon itself, finding behind every motive another motive, behind every mask another mask, until the ultimate motive, which must remain masked (otherwise the endless regression would be ended, the disease would be cured). We can call this ultimate motive the *motive for unmasking* itself.
> […]
> We are now beyond all questions of sincerity. The possibility we face is of a confession made via a process of relentless self-unmasking which might yet be not the truth but a self-serving fiction, because the unexamined, unexaminable principle behind it may be not a desire for the truth but a desire to *be a particular way*. The more coherent such a hypothetical fiction of the self might be, the less the reader's chance of knowing whether it is a true confession. We can test its truth only when it contradicts itself or comes into conflict with some "outer," verifiable truth, both of which eventualities a careful confessing narrator can in theory avoid. (280, original emphasis)

The *motive for unmasking* could be seen as a theme running through most of Coetzee's fictions, including the autobiographical fictions. In these, the desire to *be a particular way* is outwitted by the fictionalization of the autobiographical material, but reappears as "flaws in the structure of the text." The insistence on an individuality apart from all others runs through both *Boyhood* and *Youth*, as well as *Summertime*, along with a general social anxiety.

Assessing Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Coetzee voices a suspicion:

> It would not be surprising, if the narrator's confession *were* a lying, self-serving fiction, that the repressed truth should break through its surface, particularly at moments of stress, in the

> forms of stirrings of the heart, intimations of the unacknowledged, utterances of the inner self, or that the truth should soon be repressed again. (281; original italics)

These fissures in narrative are of particular interest to Coetzee. And he resignedly comments that "the one process that is not subjected to the scrutiny of self-awareness is the narrative process itself." (281) In his own fictions, Coetzee on many occasions accentuates such fissures and also lets the narrative voice reflect on its own narrative process – the most obvious example would be Susan Barton in *Foe*. In his autobiographical fictions the use of third person narration from a neutral vantage point precludes a metafictional reflection of the narrative process.

Coetzee moves on to discuss the confessions presented in Dostoevsky's novels *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*, the former providing the title theme of the essay, "double thought" (*dvoinaya mysl'*; 282), the latter providing a confessor (Tikhon) as counterpart to the confessant (Stavrogin). The "double thought" infests all confession, since it necessarily brings with it an endless masquerade of motives. Tikhon seems to propose – according to Coetzee's reading – a way out of the endless regression of confession, namely "by another regression of self-scrutiny that has the potential to extend to infinity but also has true potential to end in self-forgiveness." (290) In the final section of this essay, "The End of Confession," Coetzee goes beyond Tikhon and proposes "faith and grace" to be the only meaningful options for bringing confession to an end, claiming that Dostoevsky's narratives have explored the "impasses of secular confession, pointing finally to the sacrament of confession as the only road to self-truth." (291) Returning to Tolstoy's "Kreutzer Sonata" (and contrasting it with the earlier *Anna Karenina*), Coetzee arrives at the final question, "what potential for the attainment of truth can there be in the self-interrogation of a confessing consciousness?" (293)

Taking a look at *Age of Iron* and The *Master of Petersburg*, both of which were written within a decade after the publication of the three essays discussed above, we can see the impact of the confessional mode on the narrative and its voice. Elizabeth Curren lays bare her innermost to her daughter in a letter, giving the reader opportunity (or even forcing him) to accompany her on her inner journey of redemption, both on the personal level of the mother-daughter relationship and more significantly on a historical level of being a beneficiary of apartheid. At the same time this journey is delayed and interrupted by moments of self-doubt and a refusal to present or even propose one final truth, instead opening up more and more questions regarding her salvation and the possibility of arriving at self-forgiveness. And exactly by maintaining a position of doubt, the narrative voice forces us to empathetically engage with the protagonist, allowing us at no point to dismiss her completely, since she

keeps arriving at new points of departure (while some of them recur again and again in different forms, such as the notion of protest suicide).

The writer-figure Dostoevsky goes through a very similar process, with inverted emphasis: the father-son relationship forms the core element of the narrative, while the historical background of Russia during its interregnum provides the ideological background. Coetzee's Dostoevsky also chokes on his own narrative ("It tastes like gall.") and the reader can sense his desire for closure and an end of confession, but self-forgiveness is not available to him; Dostoevsky's path leads him to his next novel, which represents yet another betrayal of Pavel (according to Coetzee's narrative). Curren on the other hand could be thought to achieve at least some sense of forgiveness dying in the embrace of Vercueil. The shift from Elizabeth Curren's first person narration to the third person narration of Dostoevsky's story might be symptomatic for acknowledging the limits of the confessional mode.

Coetzee's autobiographical fictions can be viewed as continuing the confessional mode employed in *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*. Only now he applies it to his own personal history, which is fictionalized for two reasons: 1) to reject the notion of an own truth/a true self 2) to ascertain the non-identity of authorial self (present) and narrative self (past). The use of third person narrative supports both aims. In the autobiographical fictions Coetzee turns his sympathetic imagination on himself and enables himself to experience narrative empathy for his prior selves. The reader is invited to join him on this journey into his own past and to engage empathetically with his childhood in South Africa under apartheid, with his years spent in London, and finally with his return to South Africa in the 1970s.

## 5.3 *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2001) – Setting the Stage for Self-Narration

Traditionally, the identity of author and narrator in autobiography was not doubted; even to the point of taking fake autobiographies at face value, only to be disappointed if another truth emerged in the aftermath of the publication. Coetzee avoids this simple equation by resorting to third-person narration. Responding to Joanna Scott's questions about childhood impressions of the country [South Africa], Coetzee reflects on how his writing has changed the quality and reliability of his recollections:

> They were just impressions of life. And by now they have been recalled, revisited, revised so often that I can hardly claim with any confidence that they belong to my childhood. They belong, by now, to the childhood I have constructed for myself in retrospect, that is, to autobiography. (Coetzee in an interview, Scott 1997: 82-83)

Coetzee speaks of "the childhood I have constructed," and reading *Boyhood* we can see how the narrative is manipulated and how selectively it chooses to focus on particular episodes and aspects while neglecting others. The third-person narration reinforces the sense of discontinuity between former selves of the author and his present self.

Seen from a different vantage point, one might relate the self-estrangement enacted in these autobiographical fictions to Coetzee's repeatedly experienced frustration – and feeling ostracized – through the cultural coding of his immediate environment. *Boyhood* in particular displays Coetzee's shifting allegiances between his mother's culture (German become South African English) and his father's (South African Boer). Tonje Vold finds traces of this theme both in an interview and a later fiction of Coetzee:

> In *Boyhood*, Coetzee writes about John: "though he speaks Afrikaans without an accent, he could not pass for a moment as an Afrikaner" (124). In *Doubling the Point*, the author speaks of himself: "No Afrikaner would consider me an Afrikaner. That, it seems to me, is the acid test for group membership" (341). In *Slow Man*, Paul picks up the tone: "I can pass among Australians, I cannot pass among French. That is, as far as I am concerned, all there is to it, to the national-identity business: where one passes and where one does not" (197). (Vold 2011: 48).[175]

### 5.3.1 *Boyhood* – An Introduction to Slaughter

The opening of *Boyhood*[176] demonstrates Coetzee's careful construction of narrative perspective. The first sentence begins with "They live […]" (1), followed by establishing the setting just outside of Worcester – not the frontier of early settlement, but of new settlement (new housing). The third person plural present tense is continued throughout the first paragraph. The second paragraph introduces the mother's attempt at keeping chicken, but the chicken become sick and the mother is advised by her sister to cut out "the horny shells under their tongues." (1) At this point the narrative perspective narrows down through the use of the possessive pronoun "his" in connection with the boy's "mother" (1). In the same sentence that introduces the notion of a third person singular as potential focalizer, the mother's 'treatment' of the chicken is described in detail, resulting in the hens' reaction in the next sentence: "The hens shriek and struggle, their eyes bulging. He shudders and turns away." (2) With the introduction of the actual third person "He" comes both a physical reaction (shudders) and an emotional reaction (turns away). This is immediately followed by "He thinks […]" (indicating

[175] The struggle with an identity derived from both Afrikaner and British culture continues in *Summertime*. See Jacobs 2011.
[176] Coetzee 1998. All quotes in the following will be taken from BH unless indicated otherwise.

mental reflection following his initial reaction) and proposing an analogy to the mother's treatment of steaks (=dead meat); and "he thinks of her bloody fingers." (2)[177]

As the third person focalizer is introduced the narrative comprehensively records his reaction to the harsh treatment of others (in this case: hens), including his mental reflection of what he has witnessed, which anticipates the unconditional but ambivalent love the boy feels for his mother. The reader has privileged access to the boy's consciousness and his emotional setup; now it is up to the reader to allow his sympathetic imagination to become active in taking part in the boy's experiences.

J.A. De Reuck compares Coetzee's autobiographical fictions to his early narratives:

> The first-person narratives of *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* have a serious purpose – that of ensuring that we know and respond to their protagonists as far as possible as we do to ourselves. The third person of *Boyhood* and *Youth* is carefully chosen: the device means that *both author and reader* relate to him as to a biographical – rather than autobiographical – subject. (De Reuck 1988: 158)

With the protagonists of the early novels the challenge for Coetzee lay in adopting their perspective and sharing this experience with the reader. Now the challenge lies in adopting an external perspective and treating his former self as a biographical subject. This narrative distance allows the reader's narrative and cognitive empathy to become active and to engage with the inner life of the boy.

The first impression of the boy seems to suggest his heightened sensitivity in regard to cruelty towards animals. This is contrasted three paragraphs later with an act of cruelty committed by him: "He holds the pipe [of the vacuum cleaner] over a trail of ants, sucking them up to their death." (2) This is not reflected on, instead the text continues: "There are ants in Worcester." (2) The act of violence against the hens is redirected and relived in the violence against ants, a simulation that allows the boy to experience first-hand the empowerment that comes with violence, and this time there is not even a moment of hesitation, no reflection of his actions. As readers we get a feeling for the conflicted nature of his emotional responses. The attention of the narrative shifts to the mother, her wish for a means of transport, shifting from a horse to a bicycle; the gleeful comments of "his father" are also reported. By now, the narrative has firmly established the third person singular as central consciousness between "his mother" and "his father"; their actions are reported as perceived or imagined by the boy. As the mother clumsily learns how to master the bicycle, the boy joins his father in his glee over her imminent failure: "His heart turns against her. That evening he joins in with his

[177] The opening scene of *Boyhood* mirrors the first close reading of his dissertation on Beckett's style, in which he focuses on the horror of Belacqua at the boiling of a live lobster (in Beckett's *Dante and the Lobster*). (Coetzee 1969: 21)

father's jeering. He is well aware what a betrayal this is. Now his mother is all alone." (3) Soon the mother abandons cycling altogether, and the boy "knows that he must bear part of the blame. I will make it up to her, he promises himself." (4)

This first chapter serves as an exposition both of setting and characters as well as of narrative strategy – the latter performed very subtly. The reader also gets a feeling for the compromised position of the boy between mother and father: "He does not often gang up with his father against her: his whole inclination is to gang up with her against his father." (4) This theme pervades Coetzee's depiction of 'his' South African childhood. The present tense narration forestalls retrospective assessment and judgment, while at the same time heightening the immediacy of reported events and emotions for the reader (and for the author); it is a reliving of a childhood rather than a retelling.

### 5.3.2 *Youth* – Money Matters, Art and Love Liberate

In comparison, the previous "They" of the family in Worcester, *Youth* [178] opens with the singular "He" of the bachelor John living in Cape Town. The narrative moves on to discuss the mundane procedure of how he pays rent to the owner, spiced up by the admission of a lie about his current position ("[…] he is in the flat under false pretences"; 1). This admission is immediately modified: "It is not a lie, not entirely." (1) This introduction links the text to the confessional mode I had previously discussed in the context of Coetzee's essays, with shame as "confessable currency" and the self-deceit of excuses made and explanations offered. Once we follow this line of thought, we are bound to question the truthfulness of the narrative, its reliability in relating the truth. It is almost a technical demonstration of the complicated nature of a secular confession. We can also relate the character's admission of being "not entirely" truthful about his circumstances to the text as a whole. As if the narrated central consciousness and sole focalizer was warning the reader not to expect too much truth. Instead the reader will accompany the main character on his search for an "own truth," which we already know he will not find.

In the fifth paragraph one central theme of *Youth* is introduced, when the anti-hero supervises the university library in the evening:

> Sometimes he imagines a beautiful girl in a white dress wandering into the reading room and lingering distractedly after closing time; he imagines showing her over the mysteries of the bindery and cataloguing room, then emerging with her into the starry night. It never happens. (2)

[178] Coetzee 2003. All quotes in the following section will be taken from *Youth* unless indicated otherwise.

We take part in this little act of the imagination as an observer, but do not inhabit the third person perspective. The distance between reader and character is maintained, while at the same time giving the reader access to the intimate thoughts and desires of the protagonist.

The text moves on to enumerate young John's jobs and earnings, establishing his financial independence: "He may only be nineteen but he is on his own feet, dependent on no one." (2) Being a solitary character, the focalization of the narrative achieves a stronger effect than in *Boyhood*, where the narrative occasionally included the perspectives of others. Here, the third person perspective dominates the discourse, reinforcing his solitary independence: "He is proving something: that each man is an island; that you don't need parents." (3) Dominic Head notes: "Self-evidently, *Youth* is characterized as the flow of a voice fitted to the author's mind, and constantly checked by doubts; what is not immediately obvious is that it is often funny, most especially when those doubts and scruples give way to open self-mockery." (Head 2009: 14) The following two paragraphs reveal to the reader John's "sense of how odd he looks," i.e. his self-image:

> He is slim and looselimbed, yet at the same time flabby. He would like to look attractive but he knows he is not. There is something essential he lacks, some definition of feature. Something of the baby still lingers in him. How long before he will cease to be a baby? What will cure him of babyhood, make him into a man." (3)

The body comes into play as a reminder of his past childhood, which lingers on in his features. And, as his daydream in the library already indicated, he believes his salvation to lie in the love of a girl: "The beloved, the destined one, will see at once through the odd and even dull exterior he presents to the fire that burns within him." (3) The idea of salvation through love is immediately linked to the salvation through art: "For he will be an artist, that has long been settled." (3) *Boyhood* (1997)

## 5.4 Boyhood (1997)

### 5.4.1 Self-Imaging

> He is a liar and he is cold-hearted too: a liar to the world in general, cold-hearted toward his mother. It pains his mother, he can see, that he is steadily growing away from her. Nevertheless he hardens his heart and will not relent. His only excuse is that he is merciless to himself too. He lies but he does not lie to himself. (35)

By confessing deceitfulness the narrative aligns the reader with the real "He", which the boy reveals to us but hides from the textual others. The persona presented publicly hides the turmoil taking place within. In "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" Coetzee strongly disavowed the idea of a "true self"; now, in *Boyhood*, the

narrative playfully underlines these doubts. On the level of the text a strategy of narrative authentication is enacted, while we remain aware of the artificial fictional gap between biographical subject and author. As Coetzee takes one step back and creates a distance between himself and his former self, he interrupts the idea of continuity of identity and character, preventing a close alignment of past fictional boy self and present authorial self. The distance allows the author an unflinching look at who he was, which then again allows for self-empathy to arise and enter the text.

We see the boy oscillating between his desire to belong, a desire to be normal – "He wishes she would be normal. If she were normal, he could be normal." (38) – and the desire to stand apart: "I hate normal people." (78) The continuous pressure the boy experiences creates a strong impression of isolation, sometimes self-willed, but altogether a result of both the family constellation and the social climate of South Africa under apartheid. Referring to his morning sicknesses, which he admittedly fakes on occasion in order to stay home and read books, the boy nonetheless feels a lack of trustworthiness in himself, which is registered by the people around him: "On every side he is suspected of being a cheat." (107) The boy presents a public and private persona, a duplicity resulting in a fundamental sense of shame and a constant fear of being discovered as a fraud:

> If the worst were to happen […] revealing […] that he is still a baby and will never grow up – if all the stories that have been built up around him, built by himself, built by years of normal behaviour, at least in public, were to collapse, and the ugly, black, crying, babyish core of him were to emerge for all to see and laugh at, would there be any way in which he could go on living? (112)

The question of how to "go on living" once his true identity is revealed gives cause for the boy to ponder his own death. Like previously Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* (and later Costello in *Elizabeth Costello*), Coetzee puts the boy through the mental exercise of imagining his own death. As I have argued, this act of the imagination represents an ultimate test of the limits of the sympathetic imagination:

> In this silence he tries to imagine his death. He subtracts himself from everything: from the school, from the house, from his mother; he tries to imagine the days wheeling through their course without him. But he cannot. Always there is something left behind, something small and black, like a nut, like an acorn that has been in the fire, dry, ashy, hard, incapable of growth, but *there*. He can imagine himself dying but he cannot imagine himself disappearing. Try as he will, he cannot annihilate the last residue of himself. (112; original italics)

The scrupulous self-doubting is contrasted with a heightened sense of self-importance and intellectual superiority:

> Nothing can touch you, there is nothing you are not capable of. Those are the two things about him, two things that are really one thing, the thing that is right about him and the

> thing that is wrong about him at the same time. This thing that is two things means that he will not die, no matter what; but does it not also mean that he will not live?
> He is a baby. […] Before him, as she [his mother] advances, everything turns to stone and shatters. He is just a baby with a big belly and a lolling head, but he possesses this power. (113)

The regression to a prior state of absolute dependence resurfaces in the thoughts of the boy as well as in images included in the narrative, such as the photo of Aunt Annie "with a baby in her arms said to be him." (115) This casual remark points to a sense of self-estrangement regarding earlier representations of the self – here in the simple sense of a picture of him as a baby. Similarly, Coetzee might look back at *Boyhood* and refer to the protagonist as a boy "said to be him."

The notion of a true self is picked up repeatedly in *Boyhood*. In chapter sixteen, dedicated largely to his schooling, one main theme of *Youth* is foreshadowed, namely the idea of the emerging artist-to-be: "Whoever he truly is, whoever the true 'I' is that ought to be rising out of the ashes of his childhood, is not being allowed to be born, is being kept puny and stunted." (140) Commenting on a reading exercise in school, the narrative establishes a connection to the notion of writing:

> What he would write if he could, if it were not Mr Whelan reading it, would be something darker, something that, once it began to flow from his pen, would spread across the page out of control, like spilt ink, like shadows racing across the face of still water, like lightning crackling across the sky. (140)

This reflection on the matter of writing connects to reflections presented in *The Master of Petersburg*, the thoughts issued by the figure of the matured writer Dostoevsky (cf. MOP 236); also, the "electric being" later discussed by Elizabeth Costello is evoked in the image of "lightning crackling across the sky." The idea of "dark" impulses recurs frequently throughout the text – as in *The Master of Petersburg*. The narrative conveys the uneasiness of the boy regarding the emerging self – which stands apart from the "true 'I'" mentioned earlier:

> At the age of thirteen he is becoming surly, scowling, dark. He does not like this new, ugly self, he wants to be drawn out of it, but that is something he cannot do by himself. Yet who is there who will do it for him? (151f)

The "new, ugly self" carries with it a new quality beyond the untruthfulness of the young boy, infused with early sexual impulses. The emerging conflict is situated precisely on the verge of growing out of childhood, as the boy self is not yet surpassed but also not anymore available as a stable self-image. As the narrative approaches closure, both formally (the book ends) and in narrative logic (the boyhood ends), in chapter eighteen, the father's decline takes centre stage, as he loses his job and the tension in the family increases: "They are all four in the house now, like rats in a cage, avoiding each other, hiding in separate rooms." (158) One morning when his mother is out of the house, he ponders the silence and wonders whether his

father might have committed suicide, quickly embracing the idea and wishing it to be true. The boy now speaks of "the war he has waged on his father." (159) Coetzee builds up the scene, letting the boy enter "*his* room" (159), the italics marking the difference of the third person possessive pronoun (here the father) and at the same time heightening the significance of the father's absent presence. As so often, Coetzee creates an atmosphere of meaningfulness by evoking the "chirruping of sparrows outside, the whirr of their wings." (159) The foregrounding of animals sounds indicates a heightened awareness of the protagonist (cf. birdsong in *Age of Iron* 166 and *Youth* 117), subsequently affecting the reader. The aversion he feels for his father is here supplemented with an image: "Beside the bed is a chamber-pot in which cigarette-stubs float in brownish urine. He has not seen anything uglier in his life." (159) The boy compares the "War" in which his father fought to the war the son has waged on him for the past seven years. And the image of his father he has now encountered prompts him to announce that "today he has triumphed." (160) Expanding the pathos of this declaration into the historical dimension of war, the boy likens himself to the "Russian soldier on the Brandenburg Gate, raising the red banner over the ruins of Berlin." (160) This image of glorious victory is in the next paragraph immediately countered by a sense of his father's shame contaminating his own sense of integrity, combined with a yearning for motherly protection (here the grandmother). The narrative shifts back from the boy's reflection to the physical presence of his father asleep in his bed:

> A ball of phlegm catches in his father's throat. He coughs, turns on his side. His eyes open, the eyes of a man fully conscious, fully aware of where he is. The eyes take him in as he stands there, where he should not be, spying. The eyes are without judgment but without kindness either. [...] The eyes continue to regard him, peaceably, distantly. Then they close and he is asleep again. (160)

This carefully orchestrated gaze of the father encapsulates the frustration of the boy, who returns to his room. What follows is not a condemnation of his father, but instead an act of perspective-taking that transcends the narrative. The boy almost seems to step outside of the text and take a look over the shoulder of the reader:

> Sometimes the gloom lifts. The sky, that usually sits tight and closed over his head, not so near that it can be touched but not that much further either, opens a slit, and for an interval he can see the world as it really is. He sees himself in his white shirt with rolled-up sleeves and the grey short trousers that he is on the point of outgrowing: not a child, not what a passer-by would call a child, too big for that now, too big to use that excuse, yet still as stupid and self-enclosed as a child: childish; dumb; ignorant; retarded. In a moment like this he can see his father and his mother too, from above, without anger: not as two grey and formless weights seating themselves on his shoulder, plotting his misery day and night, but as a man and a woman living dull and trouble-filled lives of their own. The sky opens, he sees the world as it is, then the sky closes and he is himself again, living the only story he will admit, the story of himself. (160f)

Seeing himself and his parents in this manner, "from above", playfully enacts the point of view usually associated with an omniscient narrator. Extending this vision to include his parents shows the boy's attempt to gain a more neutral perspective on his parents and on what he feels to be their shortcomings. The closing line of above quote connects the narrative back to its point of focalization, the boy "living the only story he will admit, the story of himself." To the reader, who takes part in the boy's insight that is staged like an epiphany, all the thoughts and reflections are made available by the text, both the secret inner life of the boy as well as his publicly presented image. The imagination of the boy grants him only a short moment of empathy for his parents' struggles, quickly returning him to his self-constructed "story of himself"; although his double thoughts will continue to be transparent to the reader. To me this represents a particular strength of the narrative in *Boyhood*; the boy shares with us both the circumstances he grows up under and his coming-to-terms with himself as a wilful and selfish individual, contrasting this process with the impression he imagines making on others. The above quoted shift of perspective can be related to Coetzee's position as an author looking back on his former boy self, seeing himself as "from above". Coetzee presents to us a hint as to how fictionalizing his past life might have given him a privileged site of self-assessment beyond satisfying the curiosity of the reading public.

I believe that Coetzee's narrative presentation of his former self enables him to approach it in a mode of empathy, initiated by this narrative act of his sympathetic imagination. The perspective from above can only last a blinking moment, for otherwise its suspension would disrupt the narrative fabric. The author Coetzee spins a narrative web around his boyhood memories, protecting his current identity, while at the same time passing unfavourable judgments on his former self. Christine Ann Roux speaks of "the silent 'I' in combination with the autobiographical mode." (Roux 2002: 92-93) Through the use of his sympathetic imagination Coetzee has allowed himself to create a powerful self-portrait of himself as a child without giving himself up to public discourse, retaining a blank spot for the "silent 'I'" that controls the text. Yet, it is an empathetic silence that we can hear ringing throughout the text, in spite of all the self-deprecating imagery presented in the narrative.

### 5.4.2 Double Thoughts Exposed: Shame and Guilt

The boy John readily confesses to the reader his double nature, which is revealed not only in his ambivalent relationship to his mother: "His rages against his mother are one of the things he has to keep a careful secret from the world outside. […] At home he is an irascible despot, at school a lamb. […] By living this double life he has created for himself a burden of

imposture." (13) What has been a burden for the boy is confessable currency for the author Coetzee.

In chapter fourteen the family visits Aunt Annie (the aunt of the mother) in the hospital and spend one night in her home. A book press standing in Aunt Annie's storeroom (where she keeps her father's books) catches the attention of the two brothers – one of few appearances of the boy's brother David – and they pin down each others' arms with the great screw. The narrative reports the boy's thoughts about how little it would take to crush his brother's arm, wondering what stops him from finding out. It then jumps to a visit on a farm, where they (he and his brother) come upon a mealie-grinding machine. On the boy's demand the little brother puts his hand in the funnel. This time the boy John turns the handle far enough to crush the hand of his brother: "His brother stood with his hand trapped in the machine, ashen with pain, a puzzled, inquiring look on his face." (119) As a consequence, his middle finger gets amputated. Recalling the boy's strong emotional reaction to his mother's cruel treatment of the hens in chapter one, the reader might expect a similar rush of sympathy after witnessing the pain suffered by his brother. Instead it takes only a few lines to describe the rushing to the hospital, then how after a while the bandage is replaced by a "little black leather pouch," and finally the fact that the six-year-old brother did not complain. (119) No immediate reaction from little John is recorded. Instead, the position of the narrative voice shifts into the future, into the present moment of writing or reading respectively: "He has never apologized to his brother, nor has he ever been reproached with what he did. Nevertheless, the memory lies like a weight upon him, the memory of the soft resistance of flesh and bone, and then the grinding." (119) The retrospection offered here is a singularly strong instance of breaking with the narrative focalization and allowing a comment from the present, reinforced by the revisiting of the embodied pain of the brother. The weight of the memory implies a feeling of guilt, not registered by the boy but by the self presently writing.

The narrative returns to the present visit at Aunt Annie's house. He recalls Aunt Annie's instructions to love and support his mother and broods over love: "*Love*: a word he mouths with distaste." (121; original italics) From seeing no sense in love (as boys usually don't see), based on seeing movie actors kissing, the text jumps to the father's penis (seen only once), the parents' separate beds, and the presumably early days of his parents being in love. (121) Coetzee guides the reader through fundamental questions regarding sex and love that are common for a young boy, accompanied by the envious love for the mother, which oscillates between emotional emancipation and total dependence. The boy's surprise about "the fierce and angry emotions he feels for his mother" being incited by watching "swooning

on the screen." (122) The close analysis of the contradiction, acknowledging the love of his mother yet remaining on guard not to allow it to touch him or to be openly displayed, goes beyond the common introspection of a young boy. What matters here more than the plausibility of the depth of reflection, is the acuity of the observation, which prepares the reader intellectually for the following act of the boy's sympathetic imagination:

> He yearns to be rid of her watchful attention. There may come a time when to achieve this he will have to assert himself , refuse her so brutally that with a shock she will have to step back and release him. Yet he has only to think of that moment, imagine her surprised look, feel her hurt, and he is overtaken with a rush of guilt. Then he will do anything to soften the blow: console her, promise he is not going away.
> Feeling her hurt, feeling it as intimately as if he were part of her, she part of him, he knows he is in a trap and cannot get out. [...] *Love*: this is what love really is, this cage in which he rushes back and forth, back and forth, like a poor bewildered baboon. [...] His heart is old, it is dark and hard, a heart of stone. That is his contemptible secret. (122)

In this passage the narrative is again infused with retrospective insight, provided by the author from beyond the point of narration. But the hard judgment is paired with an act of sympathetic imagination leading to empathy on the side of the boy when he pictures the pain of his mother should he ever reject her with finality. Imagining her "surprised look" leads to "feeling her hurt," followed by a "rush of guilt." We are still in the confessional mode, the series of transgression-confession-penitence-absolution being played out, though not as might be expected in regard to maiming his brother, but instead in regard to his complicated emotions for his mother.

The brother's physical injury does not affect the boy John, who remains void of an empathetic physical reaction when seeing the pain in the face of his brother. On the face of things, he remains an observer; only the subsequent retrospective insertion introduces a notion of his guilt into the narrative. The "weight" of never having apologized to his brother still weighs on the narrating consciousness years later. While writing *Boyhood* might not deliver Coetzee from this "weight", the re-imagining gives both the author and the reader access to a more empathetic experience of the scene.

Coetzee's tour through his childhood is complex and rich in introspective detail. The reader comes to understand the boy's conflicted position, the complicated circumstances he experiences both in his family and in apartheid society. The renewed attentiveness John's childhood receives in *Boyhood* prepares the ground for an empathetic re-enactment of it through the author's and the reader's sympathetic imagination.

The text Coetzee presents to us readers does not ask for forgiveness, exculpation – though ultimately the unflinching self-scrutiny is not far from Rousseau's opening claim to be absolutely sincere. But Coetzee marks the myth of revealing a personal truth as a fictional

project of the imagination loosely based on remembered events. One is not inclined to like this self-conscious and slightly arrogant boy self constructed by Coetzee, with the everlasting need to stand out, to excel, to be "special" in one or the other way. But one is forced to experience the various pressure points of his childhood – above all the feeling of not fitting in. This mal-adjustment also characterizes the boy's parents, who are not a culturally homogenous couple and don't make it easy for the boy to form attachments. The reader may wonder about the few appearances the younger brother makes, how little he takes part in boy John's life. Would he be included more, the narrative might shift away from John as central point of focalization. The story is purposely attuned to the purpose of highlighting the conditions of a childhood, examining them closely through the lens of third-person focalization, with the close scrutiny of Monsieur Vivisecteur (Coetzee 2005: 31).[179] For the narrative empathy of the reader this setup is most favourable, since he remains an impartial observer with an insider's viewpoint. And the insider reveals to the reader both his bright and his dark sides, giving the reader occasion to both empathize with the child and to co-experience the limitations of his sympathetic imagination.

### 5.4.3 The Farm: Voëlfontein

The setting for the warmest moments of *Boyhood* is the family farm Voëlfontein, to which chapter eleven (with 24 pages the longest chapter) is dedicated. The theme of the family farms is introduced in chapter four: "Through the farms he is rooted in the past; through the farms he has substance. […] All farms are important. Farms are places of freedom, of life." (22) Chapter eleven opens with a hint at the social isolation of the parents, the social contacts limited largely to "kinfolk": "On the occasion when strangers come to the house, he and his brother scuttle away like wild animals, then sneak back to lurk behind doors and eavesdrop." (78) Ordinary ("genteel") conversation exposes his insecurities. Simple questions requiring formulaic answers confuse him, "he mumbles and stammers like a fool." (78) Within his mother's family he feels accepted; there his "rude, unsocialized, eccentric" (78) character matches the cultural codes, whereas in the father's family he is forced to adapt to their codes of conduct. The boy's attitudes towards the extended families reflect the feelings for his parents, and his preference for the mother is clearly stated: "He is her son, not his father's son. He denies and detests his father." (79) This outburst is immediately followed by the memory of a climactic moment when he turned against his father, two years earlier,

[179] In a review of *Summertime* Geordie Williamson reapplies this trope (Williamson 2009).

when the mother "let his father loose on him, like a dog from a chain […], and his father's eyes glared blue and angry as he shook and cuffed him." (79) The incident is mentioned in passing; the text does not explore explicitly traumatizing moments of this childhood, but instead presents in detail the constitutive landscape of his formation.

The text returns to the landscape of his heart the moment the traumatic content is expressed, as if the idyllic pastoral might restore the peace and make the violence forgotten: "He must go to the farm because there is no place on earth he loves more or can imagine loving more." (79) The only catch of his attachment to the farm is that "he will never be more than a guest, an uneasy guest." (79) And though the boy is an "uneasy guest" on the farm, the strong bond he feels is expressed in a long elegy:

> The farm is called Voëlfontein, Bird-fountain; he loves every stone of it, every bush, every blade of grass, loves the birds that give it its name, birds that as dusk falls gather in their thousands in the trees around the fountain, calling to each other, murmuring, ruffling their feathers, settling for the night. It is not conceivable that another person could love the farm as he does. But he cannot talk about his love, not only because normal people do not talk about such things but because confessing to it would be a betrayal of his mother. It would be a betrayal not only because she too comes from a farm, a rival farm in a far-off part of the world which she speaks of with a love and longing of her own but can never go back to because it was sold to strangers, but because she is not truly welcome on this farm, the real farm, Voëlfontein. (80)

Tellingly, the love he feels encompasses only the land, with all people removed from the picture. Complementarily, the mother's uneasiness on the farm is exclusively based on people, namely the father's family. When the extended family conjoins, all twenty-six, he greedily "drinks in the atmosphere, drinks in the happy, slapdash mixture of English and Afrikaans that is their common language when they get together." (81) Exclamations of his "devouring love" (91) for the farm in the Karoo, "the beloved landscape of ochre and grey and fawn and olive-green" (90), interlace the stories of guns and men. We cannot help but be reminded of Michael K and his love for farm life contrasted with his awkwardness with people, as when the boy expresses his desire to escape from people: "Is there no way of living in the Karoo – the only place in the world where he wants to be – as he wants to live: without belonging to a family?" (91) The desire to live on one's own terms has been a prominent feature of many of Coetzee's fictional characters, especially those speaking or acting from a position of disempowerment, frailty and marginality. The boy is surely the youngest contestant so far (David in *The Childhood of Jesus* faces similar challenges), and his young age bars him from fully asserting his desire for autonomy; *Youth* presents a later stage of this struggle.

The young man John's (*Youth*) insecurity with women is not hard to foresee when hearing about the boy's difficulties in relating to others with ease – not uncommon among adolescents (and of course adults too). However, *Boyhood* features a surprising exception to

the usually constrained interactions of the boy. During the annual shearing of the sheep the boy's cousin Agnes is introduced with a scene of the four of them (two brothers, two sisters) jumping on the wool being stuffed into bales, "giggling and cavorting as if in a huge featherbed." (93) The joyfulness and carelessness of the moment comes as a surprise in this otherwise brooding narrative. The narrative goes on to relate their first meeting at the age of seven, how they take a walk in the *veld* and talk:

> He lost his reserve. As he spoke he forgot what language he was speaking: thoughts simply turned to words within him, transparent words.
> What he said to Agnes that afternoon he can no longer remember. But he told her everything, everything he did, everything he knew, everything he hopes for. In silence she took it all in. Even as he knew the day was special because of her. (94)

The two immediately bond. He compliments her "softness, her readiness to listen." (94) For the first time we see the boy relax in the company of another: "[T]hey roam around talking about things that the grown-ups would laugh at: whether the universe had a beginning; what lies beyond Pluto, the dark planet; where God is, if he exists." (95) He feels "free to be friends with her, open his heart to her." (95) Though he is aware of the incest taboo, he weighs the emotions he feels for his cousin Agnes: "Is this love – this easy generosity, this sense of being understood at last, of not having to pretend?" (95) Later in *Youth* the young man will repeatedly fail to find a woman he can similarly be at ease with. As the emotional transparency of the passage peaks, the narrative returns to a framing narrative; here the present shearing of the sheep coming to an end. The text probes the boy's emotional formation, retreating every time it touches on a sore spot. The gracefulness of their friendship (reinforced by the memory) revives the boy's sensitivity. It infuses his love for the farm: "*I belong to the farm:* that is the furthest he is prepared to go, even in his most secret heart." (96; original italics) His attachment is not exclusively restricted to the landscape, but also involves the sense of history conveyed by the graveyards and the near-by Bloemhof, site of the first farmhouse (from which he is once chased off by angry bees). Via the bees (successfully holding their territory) the narrative returns to the sheep, of which each Friday one is slaughtered "for the people of the farm." (98) He watches the farmhands Freek and Ros perform the slaughter, which is described in analytical gory detail, just as the castration of the lambs. The descriptive prose conveys the fascination of the boy, while remaining silent about his terror. This silence is expressed when he tries to approach the subject with his mother: "There is no way of talking about what he has seen." (99)[180] We feel both his fascination and his unease, though the first is more prominent. He professes that he likes meat, but at the same

[180] Find a detailed discussion of how and in how far horrible events can or cannot be represented in literature in Coetzee's 1974 essay about the work of Alex LaGuma (DP 344-360).

time is "repelled by the casual ease with which the butcher [back in Worcester] slaps down a cut of meat on the counter." (101) The chapter closes with a sympathetic reflection on why the sheep don't struggle to escape their death on the farm, as a wild buck would. Coetzee imagines how the young boy imagines whispering a warning to the sheep:

> But then in their yellow eyes he catches a glimpse of something that silences him: a resignation, a foreknowledge [...]. They know it all, down to the finest detail, and yet they submit. They have calculated the price and are prepared to pay it – the price of being on earth, the price of being alive. (102)

*Boyhood* presents to the reader a tableau of the circumstances of the boy's upbringing. His ambivalence towards people is contrasted with his firm rootedness in the countryside of the Karoo and the family farm. His fascination for the treatment of animals, leading to him being either repelled or attracted, foreshadow the later empathetic engagement of Coetzee with animals and the adoption of vegetarianism.

## 5.5 *Youth* (2001)

> The poems he writes are wry little pieces, *minor* in every sense. Whatever their nominal subject, it is he himself – trapped, lonely, miserable – who is at their centre; yet – he cannot fail to see it – these new poems lack the energy or even the desire to explore his impasse of spirit seriously. (Y 59)[181]

The "nominal subject" of *Youth* is the biographical subject John, a fictionalized version of the writer J.M. Coetzee. What the poems of young John lack is now provided in the novel: a serious exploration of "his impasse of spirit". The sense of stagnation permeates the narrative. In his monolithic idiosyncrasy John is similar to the protagonists of the first two novels of Coetzee, *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*. His encounters with others highlight the failure of his sympathetic imagination, an unwillingness to open up to others:

> He has a horror of spilling mere emotion on to the page. Once it has begun to spill out he would not know how to stop it. It would be like severing an artery and watching one's lifeblood gush out. Prose, fortunately, does not demand emotion: there is that to be said for it. Prose is like a flat, tranquil sheet of water on which one can tack about at one's leisure, making patterns on the surface. (61)

Ironically, Coetzee's novel openly demonstrates the ripples of emotions disrupting the "tranquil sheet of water" which young John takes prose to be (in contrast to poetry). While the protagonist reveals little of his feelings to others, the narrative provides a detailed account of his emotional struggles both with others (woman mainly) and with himself. Coetzee's sympathetic imagination is redirected at another former self, no longer the boy struggling with growing up under apartheid, but now the artist as a young man.

[181] All quotes in 5.5 will be taken from *Youth* unless indicated otherwise.

### 5.5.1 Cold and Frozen John's Hot Desires

> If he were a warmer person he would no doubt find it all easier: life, love, poetry. But warmth is not in his nature. Poetry is not written out of warmth anyway. Rimbaud was not warm. Baudelaire was not warm. Hot, indeed, yes, when it was needed – hot in life, hot in love – but not warm. He too is capable of being hot, he has not ceased to believe that. But for the present, the present indefinite, he is cold: cold, frozen. (168)

What the farm was to the boy, the women are to the youth: A promise of home, a promise of belonging. The emotional intimacy of *Boyhood* allowed the reader to feel close to the boy John, allowed us to enter his mind and catch a glimpse of his probing of cultural identities, his complexly portrayed ambivalent feelings for his parents, but also of his joyful encounter with Agnes. In *Youth* the focus shifts to the portrait of the writer as a young man, hoping to be transformed into an artist through sexual encounters; the resulting intimacies remain accordingly functional. David Atwell sees "intimacy and detachment" as "the poles governing a single, exquisite, condition." (Atwell 2008: 237) Large parts of *Youth* are dedicated to his artistic aspirations and the artists he considers as role models, alternating with reflections on the failed affairs he stumbles into. The apparent irony of his self-deprecation creates a distance between author and character, while also distancing the reader. In previous novels Coetzee has managed to portray unlikeable characters while still providing access points for the reader's empathy to catch on. In *Youth* there are virtually none of these: all encounters take place without emotional depth, not even the physical encounters are depicted as moments of intimacy, neither in the physical nor in the emotional sense.

Early on, still in Cape Town, he becomes friendly with Jacqueline: "In a secluded space among the rocks she turns on him, pouts, offers him her lips. He responds, but uneasily." (5) An afterthought in brackets "(how did that happen?)" is a singular instance of narrative rupture in *Youth*. In *Boyhood* similar instances indicated the retrospective stance of the narrating author, but here it remains plausibly within the tone of the narrative and provides no insight but only underlines the social awkwardness of the young man. His passivity towards women expresses itself clearly in this first affair: "Within a week Jacqueline has quit the nurses' residence and moved in with him in his flat. Looking back, he cannot remember inviting her: he has merely failed to resist." (7) One day Jacqueline reads his diary entries, in which the young man holds back nothing, and leaves him right away. This incident neatly illustrates the conflict of an artist drawing on his immediate surroundings including the people around him. The core question in his subsequent reflection is not why things go awry with Jacqueline, instead the truthfulness of autobiographical writing is addressed:

> Is he sorry? Certainly he is sorry Jacqueline read what she read. But the real question is, what was his motive for writing what he wrote? Did he perhaps write it in order that she should read it? Was leaving his true thoughts lying around where she was bound to find them his way of telling her what he was too cowardly to say to her face? What are his true thoughts anyway? Some days he feels happy, even privileged, to be living with a beautiful woman, or at least not to be living alone. Other days he feels differently. Is truth the happiness, the unhappiness, or the average of the two?
> *The question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded goes to the heart of all his writing.* If he is to censor himself from expressing ignoble emotions – resentment at having his flat invaded, or shame at his own failures as a love – how will those emotions ever be transfigured and turned into poetry? And if poetry is not to be the agency of his transfiguration from ignoble to noble, why bother with poetry at all? Besides, who is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings? Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? At one moment he might truly be himself, at another he might simply be making things up. How can he know for sure? Why should he even *want* to know for sure? (9; first emphasis added)

Note how the attention is directed back to the young man himself, spending not a moment on Jacqueline's role in the drama (not here nor in the rest of the chapter). The "real question" addresses his motives, his choices, his self and its artistic expression.

Feeling attracted to Flaubert's Emma Bovary (25),[182] to Ingeborg Bachmann (134) or the actresses Monica Vitti (48) and Anna Karina (128) is part of this narcissist self-reflection, where the "I" suffers delusions of grandeur which seep into his dreams and aspirations: "In a perfect world he would sleep only with perfect women, women of perfect femininity yet with a certain darkness at their core that will respond to his own darker self." (32) Naturally, all real women who cross his path can only be inferior to his ideal; while he remains painfully aware of his own incommensurability. His comments about Emma Bovary illustrate his enthrallment to fictional women:

> He likes Flaubert. Emma Bovary in particular, with her dark eyes, her restless sensuality, her readiness to give herself, has him in thrall. He would like to go to bed with Emma, hear her famous belt whistle like a snake as she undresses. But would Pound approve? He is not sure that wanting to meet Emma is a good enough reason for admiring Flaubert. In his sensibility there is still, he suspects, something rotten, something Keatsian.
> Of course Emma Bovary is a fictional creation, he will never run into her in the street. But Emma was not created out of nothing: she had her origin in the flesh and blood experiences of her author, experiences that were then subjected to the transfiguring fire of art. If Emma had an original, or several originals, then it follows that women like Emma and Emma's original should exist in the real world. And even if this is not so, even if no woman in the real world is quite like Emma, there must be many women so deeply affected by their reading of Madame Bovary that they fall under Emma's spell and are transformed into versions of her. They may not be the real Emma but in a sense they are her living embodiment. (25f)

Watching Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (1962) he sees Monica Vitti: "She is disturbed, anguished. What she is anguished about he cannot quite define; her face reveals nothing." (48) This first

[182] Echoing David Lurie's thoughts in *Disgrace*: "He thinks of Emma Bovary, coming home sated. [H]e would […] show her what bliss can be: a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss." (D 5-6)

impression is telling. Young John registers anguish in the woman, but is not able to see more in her face. The actress serves as a projection surface for his fantasies:

> With her perfect legs and sensual lips and abstracted look, Monica Vitti haunts him; he falls in love with her. He has dreams in which he, of all men in the world, is singled out to be her comfort and solace. There is a tap at his door. He steps forward, enfolds her in his arms. Time ceases; he and Monica Vitti are one. (48)

Hoping for an embodiment of his fantasies (and forgetting there is always a morning after…), the actual women never fail to disappoint his expectations and vice versa: "Naked they lie in each other's arms, but there is no warmth between them; and warmth, it becomes clear, will not grow. At last the girl withdraws, folds her arms across her breasts, pushes his hands away, shakes her head mutely." (73) This was a girl young John picked up at a poetry workshop; and like all other sexual encounters related to the reader in *Youth*, it ends in mutual embarrassment: "The verdict she has delivered on him would be his verdict too." (74)

The obvious failure of young John to open up to the women he encounters – I speak of failure in view of his aspirations to be transformed by them – is closely related to his artistic efforts and his bookishness. In order to maintain the hope for spiritual transformation through a sexual encounter (a somewhat jejune notion), his relations to women must remain ideational: "If he is a mystery to himself, how can he be anything but a mystery to others? There is a pact he is ready to offer the women in his life: if they will treat him as a mystery, he will treat them as a closed book. On that basis and that alone will commerce be possible." (132f) On the other hand, the young man does express the wish for a deeper connection, a thought attached to the notion of encountering the "right woman": "His own explanations for his failures in love, hoary by now and less and less to be trusted, is that he has yet to meet the right woman. The right woman will see through the opaque surface he presents to the world, to the depths inside; the right woman will unlock the hidden intensities of passion in him." (134) Young John senses the disparity of his hopes and expectations, hoping his artistic endeavours might attract the right kind of woman: "Just as he has fallen in love at a distance with Ingeborg Bachmann in one way and with Anna Karina in another, so, he suspects, the intended one will have to know him by his works, to fall in love with his art before she will be so foolish as to fall in love with him." (134)

The helplessness in his encounters with women continues throughout the narrative. Marie, the woman from New Zealand (all descriptions remain largely generic), bypasses his passivity:

> She embraces him, presses against him, gives him wet kisses. He does not know what to do. He does not like her, does not desire her, is repelled by her slack lips seeking out his mouth.

> First a cold shiver runs through him, then panic. "No!" he cries out. "Go away!" And he curls himself up in a ball." (29)

The emotional intensity of this moment stands out, but is also downplayed by the brevity of the scene. Coetzee follows the established game plan of setting up a physical encounter, describing the bodily reaction – here paired with the emotional state (panic) – of the protagonist, ending with a resolution of the encounter; in this case a regressive (rolling himself up in a ball) rejection of the woman encroaching his personal space.

In another episode he gets Sarah (from Johannesburg) pregnant: "How could he have got someone pregnant? In a certain sense he knows exactly how." (32) As to be expected the episode plays out shamefully. She asks him to drive her somewhere to get an illegal abortion, he complies. The whole scene showcases his awkwardness and his failure to provide any kind of comfort or consolation, instead rather sitting it out: "In fact, she put him to shame." (33) All his encounters with women reveal how his fantasies forestall an empathetic engagement, but also how difficult it can be to feel connected to others at all. While his hot desires urge him on, his frozen heart fails to be moved.

### 5.5.2 The Transforming Power of Art – Epiphanic Moments

While one strain of the narrative is dedicated to his affairs, another traces the artistic sensibility of the protagonist in formation, primarily in the second half of the narrative. In contrast to the affairs, the encounters with works of art touch young John far more deeply – beyond the above discussed intersections of art and desire – as when he visits a gallery and sees Robert Motherwell's painting "Elegy for the Spanish Republic 24" (1961):

> He is transfixed. Menacing and mysterious, the black shape takes him over. A sound like the stroke of a gong goes out from it, leaving him shaken and weak-kneed.
> Where does its power come from, this amorphous shape that bears no resemblance to Spain or anything else, yet stirs up a well of dark feeling within him? It is not beautiful, yet it speaks like beauty, imperiously. Why does Motherwell have this power and not Pollock, or Van Gogh, or Rembrandt? Is it the same power that makes his heart leap at the sight of one woman and not another? Does *Elegy for the Spanish Republic* correspond to some indwelling shape in his soul? (92)

Again, Coetzee uses the physical body to describe the impact of this particular painting on the protagonist. The accompanying emotions are metaphorically presented as "a well of dark feeling" being stirred up, only to move on to the hope for transformation (connected with the idea of the "right woman" is the idea of "the right work of art," that might "correspond to some indwelling shape in his soul").

Similarly, he experiences a "state of rapt absorption" watching the *Apu* trilogy of films by Satyajit Ray (1955-59): "Hitherto he has found in Western music, in Bach above all,

everything he needs. Now he encounters something that is not in Bach, though there are intimations of it: a joyous yielding of the reasoning, comprehending mind to the dance of the fingers." (93) His Apollonian approach to human interaction is countered by his Dionysian longings in regard to art; a desire for beauty (and order) in conflict with a desire for transformation (and chaos).

One scene is dedicated to his encounter with Beckett's *Watt*: "From the first page he knows he has hit on something." (155)[183] Like Motherwell's painting and Ray's films, Beckett speaks to young John. As does Pasolini's *Gospel According to St Matthew*, which is described as an "unsettling experience":

> He winces when nails are hammered through the hands of Jesus; when his tomb is revealed to be empty and the angel announces to the mourning women, "Look not here, for he is risen," and the Missa Luba burst out and the common folk of the land, the halt and the maimed, the despised and rejected, come running or hobbling, their faces alight with joy, to share in the good news, his own heart wants to burst; tears of exultation he does not understand stream down his cheeks, tears he has surreptitiously to wipe away before he can emerge into the world again. (154)

The emotional intensity of this episode corresponds with the panic young John felt with Marie. These are moments where Coetzee presents cracks in the detachedness and impenetrability of young John; potential access point for the sympathetic imagination of the reader to catch on and to trigger empathy. However, these moments remain confined within the protagonist's own self-perception without creating an intersection with the perception of others – this would not require a change of focalization, but merely an active engagement with someone other than himself. Accordingly, the epiphany comes to young John during a solitary nap in the park:

> Tired out, one Sunday afternoon, he folds his jacket into a pillow, stretches out on the greensward, and sinks into a sleep or half-sleep in which consciousness does not vanish but continues to hover. It is a state he has not known before: in his very blood he seems to feel the steady wheeling of the earth. The faraway cries of children, the birdsong, the whirr of insects gather force and come together in a paean of joy. His heart swells. *At last!* he thinks. At last it has come, the moment of ecstatic unity with the All! Fearful that the moment will slip away, he tries to put a halt to the clatter of thought, tries simply to be a conduit for the great universal force that has no name. (117)

The half-sleep recalls the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*; in a similar way, losing consciousness opens up new horizons for the protagonist. As in previous narratives (*Michael K* and *Age of Iron*), the epiphany follows an amalgamation of sounds (children, birds, insects).

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[183] Chris Ackerley notes:

> Where, then, will he find what he needs to know, or perhaps not to know, "a knowledge too humble to know it is knowledge?" The answer comes fifteen pages later with the discovery of *Watt*, and its aesthetic of impotence and failure that is precisely what he is seeking, that aesthetic in retrospect having shaped the structure of *Youth* and, by implication, much of the writing that has preceded this fictional memoir. (Ackerley 2011: 26)

A bucolic *locus amoenus* is evoked, with the added acoustic flavour of childhood. Whenever such moments of bliss and potential insight occur in Coetzee's fiction, they are of little obvious consequence. Michael K returns from the mountains largely unchanged, Elizabeth Curren's awaking conscience is not boosted by her union with nature (AI 166), and the young man John continues his path as before.

While by the end of the narrative young John has hardly changed or evolved, the reader once again has been challenged to employ the sympathetic imagination in encountering John and embracing him in spite of his shortcomings, just as Elizabeth Curren and David Lurie learn to love others in spite of themselves.

### 5.5.3 Remembering South Africa – Echoes from *Boyhood*

The first section of *Youth* is set in Cape Town, foregrounding the young man's will to break free from his family ties, since it was "to escape the oppressiveness of family that he left home. […] His mother is distressed by his coldness, he knows, the coldness with which he has responded to her all his life. All his life she has wanted to coddle him; all his life he has been resisting. […] He must harden his heart against her. Now is not the time to let down his guard." (18) The geographical escape to London makes him only more painfully aware of how deeply he is personally invested in his South African past, although of course with strong ambivalence. As readers we are pitched into the arena of his self-reflections, being close witnesses to his struggles.

The attention paid to him by his mother – filled with love and worries – infuriates him: "How can he make her accept that the process of turning himself into a different person that began when he was fifteen will be carried through remorselessly until all memory of the family and the country he left behind is extinguished?" (98) As readers we have access to young John's mind, while all other perspectives are excluded. For John, the mother is an adversary, holding him down with her love: "That is the trap she has built, a trap he has not yet found a way out of." (99) The family and South Africa are equally felt to be limitations to John: "South Africa is like an Albatross around his neck. He wants it removed, he does not care how, so that he can begin to breathe." (101) More than any other of Coetzee's work, *Youth* sheds light on Coetzee's complicated relation to South Africa, albeit in fictional disguise. The task to empathize is now relegated to the reader, who can follow young John and try to share his experience of searching for his place in the world independent of his parentage and heritage. At one point, young John repeats an operation familiar from *Boyhood*, "seeing himself from the outside":

> South Africa is a wound within him. How much longer before the wound stops bleeding? […]
> Now and again, for an instant, it is given to him to see himself from the outside: a whispering, worried boy-man, so dull and ordinary that you would not spare him a second glance. These flashes of illumination disturb him; rather than holding on to them, he tries to bury them in darkness, forget them. Is the self he sees at such moments merely what appears to be, or is it what he really is? What if Oscar Wilde is right, and there is no deeper truth than appearance? Is it possible to be dull and ordinary not only on the surface but to one's deepest depths, and yet be an artist? Might T.S. Eliot, for instance, be secretly dull to his depths, and might Eliot's claim that the artist's personality is irrelevant to his work be nothing but a stratagem to conceal his own dullness? (116)

These flashes are unsettling for him and not welcome, yet he cannot help but wonder – in the vague hope Oscar Wilde or T.S. Eliot might provide guidance. The reader becomes aware of the split self-image of the protagonist; a sense of (artistic, i.e. literary) greatness battling with a compelling sense of dullness. All other characters featured in *Youth* remain largely generic and only serve to illustrate the protagonist's emotional isolation.

Even about Ganapthy, an Indian co-worker introduced towards the close of the narrative and coming closest to being a friend to John, we learn very little. Functionally he is a foil for young John. The two of them are the only foreigners in the work group (145) and: "Like himself, Ganapathy is a spoiled, clever boy. Like himself, Ganapathy has run away from his mother and the smothering ease she offers." (147) Like himself, Ganapathy offers no point of access for others; only once does young John believe to see behind the public mask of Ganapathy, when he rejoices over a Vietnamese suicide bombing attack against US forces: "Now, suddenly, in his smile, the glint in his eye, he is seeing Ganapathy's secret face." (152) Nothing follows, except that young John writes to the Chinese embassy offering assistance in their war efforts. The conversation between Ganapathy and John relates mostly to work and career options; none of their exchanges goes deep. The novel ends with a fatalistic assertion of solitude:

> He and Ganapathy are two sides of the same coin: Ganapathy starving […]because he doesn't eat properly, […]; and he locked into an attenuating endgame, playing himself, with each move, further into a corner and into defeat. One of these days the ambulance men will call at Ganapathy's flat and bring him out on a stretcher with a sheet over his face. When they have fetched Ganapathy they might as well come and fetch him too. (169)

Ending on a sour note, *Youth* remains a study of a young man's failure to come to terms with himself and others, both on a personal and an artistic level. The author Coetzee has created a retrospective extension of his self in the young man John in *Youth*. Carrol Clarkson speaks of "sympathetic resonances between the young John of *Youth* and Coetzee himself," which allow us to "read in the emergent writer an increasing disaffection with deductive assumptions of an innate and self-contained structure – assumptions shared by structuralist approaches to narrative clearly rooted in Saussurean linguistics, and by approaches in other disciplines that

apply the binary systems of computational logic." (Clarkson 2009: 14) Read in this light, *Youth* becomes a manifesto of doubt, laying out the foundation for Coetzee's later fictions. The young man John offers more questions than answers; and if he does provide answers, they are mostly provisional, ready to be revised if circumstances demand it.

## 5.6 *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) – Literary Fugue and Sympathetic Imagination

The three autobiographical fictions *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009) span a decade of literary production, interspersed with the publication of *The Lives of Animals* (1999), *Disgrace* (2003) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007).[184] Costello and Señor C, the fictional speaker in *Diary of a Bad Year*, represent experimental fictional discourse with a focus on ethical concerns. They serve as textual proxies allowing Coetzee to express opinions without explicitly subscribing to them.[185] In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the themes shift from the ethical to the political arena ("eminent writers pronounce on what is wrong with today's world." DOA 21), discussing the origins of the state, democracy, terrorism and suchlike. Coetzee chooses an experimental horizontal split-page (analogous to cinematic split-screen) format, with essays constituting the top section, while the lower section narrates his encounter with his neighbour and later secretary Anya, at first from his perspective and then later complemented by Anya's perspective.

In addition to the cinematic parallel, the split-page technique also simulates musical polyphony (simultaneity of voices) and challenges the reader at every turning of the page to choose whether to follow one strain of thought onto the next page or to skip back and forth between top and bottom section. Additionally, one can repeatedly notice interferences between the two/three sections – a thought on the political plane that resonates in the private

[184] Coetzee 2007a. All quotes in 5.6 will be taken from DOA unless indicated otherwise.

[185] Johan Geertsema reads *Diary of a Bad Year* as parody:

> My argument will be that in *Diary of a Bad Year* Coetzee is staging these opinions parodically, and that one of his reasons for doing so may be understood, paradoxically, with reference to his seriousness as an artist. In making this argument I draw on two important essays from *Giving Offense*, Coetzee's 1996 book on censorship: "The Harms of Pornography: Catherine MacKinnon" and "Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry." In the former, Coetzee defines the seriousness of a "certain kind of artist" (*GO*, 73) with reference to the desire to explore "the darker areas of human experience" (*GO*, 74); he defines this project – I would argue – as parodic in character. Understanding this parodic character of the project could, moreover, help account for the peculiar form of *Diary of a Bad Year*: it is an attempt to negotiate politics, which Coetzee, in the second essay, argues is implicitly rivalrous. (Geertsema 2011: 209)

See also Poyner's discussion of Coetzee's essay fictions as "acts of genre". (Poyner 2009: 167-184)

dealings of Anya and Señor C. The link might be established by using the same words in both sections, as in the comment "On terrorism" (19-23), when the supposedly rational decision-making of Western states is characterized as a "gamble." In the lower section Señor C "gambles" with words to entice Anya, on the page before stating that "an intuitive feel" was needed for editing his essays. (18-19) The personal negotiation between the two is thereby set in relation to the negotiations of Western states with terrorist organizations, both being characterized as a gamble. Another instance is the discussion of remote-controlled warfare ("robot soldiers") paralleled by thoughts about "keyboards with super-size keys" that would allow him to type his opinions by himself, if he hadn't an "insuperable distaste" for typing. Here the advance of technology is the common factor. These interferences may even spread over a double page, as in the essay "On the curse." (47-51) Here, sympathy is expressed with those who refuse to accept "that there is no justice in the universe," while in the lower section Anya quotes "common decency" as reason for the extra help she provides for Señor C, as in cleaning his apartment. (48) On the next page the top section thematizes the "tragic guilt" taking shape in the clashes between traditional systems of belief and modern rational discourse; in the lower section the theme of common decency, a mirroring of the above refracted in the personal sphere, is continued when Alan (Anya's husband) speaks of the relatives as "vultures," ready to sweep in and collect what remains of Señor C after his death, which indicates Alan's ruthlessness. There are countless more instances of textual interferences, some more obvious than others.

To return to my overall argument, I shall relate the formal structure to the sympathetic imagination and to empathy. The characters remain vague "paper beings" with disembodied voices, "flat, almost hastily drawn figures that border on caricature."[186] Even though they share very private thoughts with the reader, the diary form forestalls the narrative drive. What remains are the three perspectives of Señor C, Anya, and later Alan, and the interplay between them, the contrast they form together, the interpersonal attitudes they reveal. The resulting polyphony succeeds in offering the reader access to three inter-related perspectives. Intuitively this would seem an almost ideal situation for the sympathetic imagination of the reader to be activated and to be challenged to accommodate conflicting perspectives. However, the disembodied nature of these voices – as with Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee does

[186] Hermann Wittenberg, in his 2010 essay "Late style in J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a bad year*," refers to the critical responses *Diary of a Bad Year* received. Wittenberg relates the "narrative minimalism" and "explicit political commentary" to Said's idea of "late style". (Said 2006) Wittenberg writes: "Said reminds us of the exceptional power of late works that reflect a special maturity, a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity often expressed in terms of a miraculous transfiguration of common reality' (2006: 6)." (Wittenberg 2010: 41)

merely provide the particulars required to simulate realism – prevents us from fully engaging with them. There is little to mirror for the reader, instead one remains a rather impassive spectator to the triadic conflict playing itself out in the lower sections. Notwithstanding, we can see progress in the relationship of Anya and Señor C, which shifts from unreciprocated physical desire to metaphysical care, to which Anya commits herself in the very end, after she has left her husband: "I can't go with you but what I will do is hold your hand as far as the gate." (226)

## 5.7 The Sympathetic Imagination in J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009)[187]

One year before his seventieth birthday, in 2009, Coetzee published *Summertime*, a pseudo-autobiographical montage of interviews, seemingly the final part of what has been labelled his autobiographical trilogy.[188] A fictional biographer, Mr Vincent, sets out to interview people who knew Coetzee in the early 1970s when he returned to South Africa after having been expelled from the US for taking part in a protest March at the Buffalo University, New York. As a man in his early thirties, this Coetzee might be considered to be in his prime. As a writer, this Coetzee is on the verge of getting *Dusklands* published, a rather spring-like debut. While the title *Dusklands* oscillates between literary reference and the mood of approaching darkness, *Summertime* sets quite a different atmosphere. Instead of intertexts *Summertime* invokes dry and arid heat, as one might experience in the Karoo, Coetzee's personal point of departure.

In Coetzee's academic work autobiography has been an ongoing concern, beginning with his inaugural lecture "Truth in Autobiography" (Cape Town, 1984; see section 5.2.2), peaking in his seminal essay "Confession and Double Thoughts" (*Doubling the Point*, 1992; see section 5.2.3), where he examines the testimonial writings of Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky, and later extending to a diversity of writers in *Stranger Shores* (2001) and *Inner Workings* (2007). In *Summertime* Coetzee engages playfully with the genre, deconstructing the truth value ascribed to it, instead demonstrating that "an autobiographer can be said to be *making* the truth of his life." (Coetzee 1984a: 4, emphasis in original).

[187] This section was published previously in similar form in: Heinicke/Heister/Klein/Prüschenk 2012.
[188] Following *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002). Coetzee 2009. All quotes in section 5.7 will be taken from ST unless indicated otherwise.

Coetzee's entire literary oeuvre illustrates the concepts of the sympathetic imagination and of embodiment. In the words of Elizabeth Costello's son John, Coetzee has "take[n] us out of ourselves" and into the lives and minds of others (EC 23). In Coetzee's fiction, *Age if Iron* (1990) and *The Master of Petersburg* (1993) mark a turning point with their intensely personal tone and the central theme of a lost child – a fabrication regarding the biography of Dostoevsky, a revalorization and fictionalization in Curren's relationship with her absent daughter, an actual event in the life of Coetzee. In *Boyhood* and *Youth* Coetzee has begun to apply the sympathetic imagination to his earlier selves, albeit in the guise of fiction. In *Summertime* the sympathetic imagination reaches its prime, its summertime.

### 5.7.1 J.S. Bach and Polyphonic Self-Narration

The textual polyphony explored by Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year* (see 5.3) in the split-page format is carried over to *Summertime*, only now without the textual synchronicity but instead with a stronger horizontal structure that comes close to the musical structure of a fugue as formulated by J.S. Bach.

In his autobiographic fiction *Boyhood* and in a lecture held in Graz, Austria, in 1991 ("What Is a Classic?" in *Stranger Shores*) Coetzee recounts his first encounter with European classical music. On a lazy summer day piano music drifts across from the neighbouring house. Coetzee is fascinated by the structured sounds reaching his ear – it is Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier he hears from next door in Cape Town in 1955. The lecture starts off with a treatment of Eliot's lecture with the same title, discussing the concept of the classic. The second part is dedicated to Bach and discusses what qualifies Bach's music as classic and the history of its reception and fame. One dominant aspect of Bach's music is the formal art of composition, lending his music a permanent air of well-balanced proportion.[189]

If Coetzee could be said to be following similar principles as Bach in this literary endeavour, *Summertime* could be understood as a literary fugue. Five voices are present in the composition – plus the voice of the diary fragments framing the interviews. The subject (theme) of the piece is the life of the young man John Coetzee in the years 1972-

[189] "In Bach nothing is obscure, no single step is so miraculous as to surpass imitation. Yet when the chain of sound is realized in time, the building process ceases at a certain moment to be the mere linking of units; the units cohere as a higher-order object in a way that I can only describe as the incarnation of ideas of exposition, complication and resolution that are more general tan music. Bach thinks in music. Music thinks itself in Bach." (*Stranger Shores* 10)

77. This theme is introduced in the exposition, the notebook entries from those years, each imitating the main theme at different pitches of discourse - personal, political and literary. The last section of *Summertime* consists of further notebook material, only now undated, and contains a confession of purposely scratching a favourite record of his father and then circles around the demise of his father. For one thing this recapitulates the themes presented in the exposition, furthermore it offers a sense of closure with the demise of Coetzee's progenitor. Each entry is glossed with short editorial comments by Coetzee on how to continue the material in the future, such as "To be expanded on: […]" (6) or "To be explored: […]" (8), forming a metafictional comment that acts as a connecting passage to the interviews. The interviews seem to pick up on these comments and expand the material through external perspectives. The main body consisting of five interviews (quite Aristotelian) resembles the development of the theme. The five voices each give a different treatment of the main theme, young John. Repeatedly references to previous texts of Coetzee are made, both openly and on the side, marking them as intertexts to the given accounts. The five voices create a horizontal structure of imitative counterpoint. If Coetzee had again employed the split-page method of *Diary of a Bad Year*, this would have entailed an emulation of the simultaneity musical composition allows for as opposed to the sequential polyphony of multi-perspective prose (which we can only read word-by-word).

The result of emulating musical composition can be termed literary polyphony; Coetzee himself repeatedly refers to Mikhail Bakhtin, as do many of his critics. Bakthinian dialogism paves the way for narrative polyphony. Coetzee has created – not only in *Summertime*, but here especially – a mirror cabinet with a multitude of reflections. He is no longer a glass sphere, but a shattered mirror with every shard reflecting a partial image of the author, showing true mastery of the sympathetic imagination.

In *Summertime* we find both the sympathetic imagination and the notion of embodiment at work in the characterization of John, an earlier self of the author who since *Boyhood* and *Youth* has moved out of the shadows of the book covers, not quite into broad daylight, but out into the literary open. The observed subject in conflict with others is now Coetzee himself. Fragments of notebooks give us a first-person perspective (though narrated in the third person), in particular on Coetzee's relationship to his father. These notebook fragments frame the five interviews that in turn add five external focalizations to the text. This multiplication of perspectives allows the reader to occupy a variety of viewpoints, creating a manifold of instances allowing an empathetic stance. The narrative

blockades, in earlier fictions by Coetzee an internalized function of the focalizing consciousness (Dostoevsky's blackouts, Magda's lapses of consciousness, Michael K.'s almost autistic isolation), now become a function of the textual form. These blockades allow the readers (and Coetzee), to empathize with the subject on display through intersubjective links established between author, characters, and readers.

Mr Vincent, the biographer, acts as literary agent of the sympathetic imagination, and Coetzee is his man. In his Nobel prize acceptance speech, an enigmatic narrative titled "He and his man", Coetzee, inverting the author-character relationship, posits the writer Defoe as an agent of Robinson Crusoe travelling the countryside and delivering reports: "Every place he goes he sends report of, that is his first business, this busy man of his" (HHM 2). As Julia Frankl, the first interviewee, relates her first encounter with Coetzee, she refers to him as Vincent's man: "It was of course your man, John Coetzee" (22; also 31). Later she comments on Coetzee's profession: "He makes his living writing reports, expert reports, on intimate human experience" (82). This clearly resonates with the reports sent to Crusoe by Defoe. Coetzee has been fabricating his own biography in a deceptive collage of actual events and invented reminiscences – less so in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, extremely so in *Summertime*. Interviewee Julia Frankl ironically comments her reporting of direct speech:

> So let me be candid: as far as dialogue is concerned, I am making it up as I go along. Which I presume is permitted, since we are talking about a writer. What I am telling you may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit (32).

In the first interview, on which I focus in this essay, Julia reports on her encounter with John, the earlier and other Coetzee. Her description of John's appearance emphasizes a lack of appeal:

> He was scrawny, he had a beard, he wore horn-rimmed glasses and sandals. He looked out of place, like a bird, one of those flightless birds; or like an abstracted scientist who had wandered by mistake out of his laboratory. There was an air of seediness about him too, an air of failure. (21)

The image of a flightless bird is the first in a row of animal comparisons employed to characterize John, stressing his deficiency in terms of both humans and animals: a flightless bird, a cold fish (47), a frog (83), a tortoise (238).[190] At the same time, "John wasn't a rat or an octopus" (57), instead "[h]e wasn't any kind of animal, and for a very specific reason: his mental capacity, and specifically his ideational faculties, were overdeveloped, at the cost of his animal self. He was *Homo sapiens*, or even *Homo*

[190] For a thorough discussion of animal comparisons in the work of Coetzee see Kellmann 2002.

*sapiens sapiens*." (58; italics in original) John's "narrow, myopic kind of cleverness" (24) gives him an "autistic quality" (52) in his failure to connect with other people and mark him as a "loner." (20) In a later interview cousin Margot reaffirms this impression: "An alleenloper, as some male animals are: a loner." (133) The animal comparisons qualify John as detached.

John's characterization as "not fully human" (83) and not quite animal opens a third option: the automaton. Julia describes "how it felt to be in bed with John" as "[t]wo automata having inscrutable commerce with each other's bodies." (53) John was "not built for love." (48) In compliance with the Cartesian idea of animals as machines (and of humans as only slightly more than 'just' machines) John says to Julia: "I never dream." He just "twitch[es] in his sleep." (54) In another interview Adriana poignantly labels John "the wooden man" (200), just as Michael K was a "stick figure". Adriana comments in her capacity as John's dance teacher:

> – he could not dance to save his life. […] This man was disembodied. He was divorced from his body. To him, the body was like one of those wooden puppets that you move with strings. You pull this string and the left arm moves, you pull that string and the right leg moves. And the real self sits up above, where you cannot see him, like the puppet-master pulling the strings. (198)

Describing John as disembodied corresponds to the idea of the automaton, which altogether contributes to ascertaining his physical make, his literary embodiment.[191] The puppet-master is the author Coetzee, who is indeed pulling all the strings of the various characters. Adriana concludes: "He was not a man of substance." (195) It almost seems as if Coetzee is demonstrating the negative capabilities of the commentators, who mostly see him as deficient in one way or another.[192]

Julia suggests that for John writing was an "unending cathartic exercise" (59), part of a "larger project of self-reformation." (58) When Mr Vincent asks her whether she believes that books "give meaning to our lives", she answers: "A book should be an axe to chop open the frozen sea inside us." (61) Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* replies to a similar question from councillor Maximov that "reading is being the arm and being the axe and being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering." (MOP 47) Julia's interview forms the largest portion of the book, and thereby allows her to play out her position in all its complexity. Julia's observations range from a "verdict" on John's sexual performance ("too impersonal" 52), on his debut

[191] On the lack of embodiment in *Summertime* see Dee 2009.
[192] Negative capabilities allow us to re-imagine perspectives fundamentally different from our own, representing what is not oneself (Kellmann 2002: 326).

as writer of *Dusklands* ("a project of self-administered therapy" 58), ending with her "mature conclusion" that he "wasn't constructed to fit into or be fitted into." (81) A singular mis-constructed puzzle piece.

Through these manoeuvres of ironic distancing Coetzee sets the stage for the enactment of the full-fledged sympathetic imagination, which he here turns on himself in an admirable effort to come to terms with his past and his public image (for the ironies at play in Mr Vincent's remarks are not only comic, but also provide a trail of leads on Coetzee's game plan):

> Of course we are all fictioneers. I do not deny that. But which would you rather have: a set of independent reports from a range of independent perspectives, from which you can then try to synthesize a whole; or the massive, unitary self-projection comprised by his oeuvre. (226)

Just as Julia was "a figure in his life" (35), John was a figure in hers, a rather tragicomic character. Julia points out: "I know he had a reputation for being dour, but John was actually quite funny. A figure of comedy." (63) And though John's social communication skills are wanting – John strikes Julia as "not a great talker" (34); when she visits him and his father "the flatness of conversation" and the "long silences" (42) irritate her – she later remarks on how much she cherished the private conversations with John: "They were fun. I enjoyed them; I missed them afterwards, after I stopped seeing him. In fact our conversations were probably what I missed most." (62) She describes John as one of "life's failures" (37), but altogether a "gentleperson." (58) Julia's attitude is highly ambivalent, alternating between harsh judgements and more benevolent assessments.

A counterweight to the negative appraisal is one particular night with John. Just as her previous assessment of John is highly ambivalent, so is her description of being in bed with John. On this "pivotal night" (83), Julia has run from her husband and lodged herself in a hotel and John comes to visit her there. Julia here speaks of "piercingly sweet lovemaking" (76) and how John "raised [her] once to unexpected erotic heights" (81), countering the fleshless animal metaphors. In this night John "for once opened his heart, the heart he normally kept wrapped in armour. With open hearts, his and mine, we came together." Julia sees a potential in John that Coetzee explores in his polyphonic self-imaging in *Summertime*. Julia diagnoses: "For him it could and should have marked a sea-change, that first opening of the heart" (83). In conclusion Julia gives another metaphor of Coetzee's elusiveness:

> But the fact is, John wasn't made for love, wasn't constructed that way – wasn't constructed to fit into or be fitted into. Like a sphere. Like a glass ball. There was no way to connect with him. That is my conclusion, my mature conclusion. (81)

The apparent irony of the metaphor hints at the humorous drift of this pastiche. *Summertime* points in the opposite direction; Coetzee structurally shatters the glass sphere and leaves the reader with shards of glass which each mirror a separate refraction of Coetzee's personality. Julia sees the developmental potential of "a man who loved by numbers" (83), the "man who mistook his mistress for a violin." (83) This refers to an episode where John asks Julia to make love to the music of a Schubert string quintet, an attempt at "musical sex" (70) that is meant to inspire them with a "history of feelings" dating back to the times of Franz Schubert. In the course of this particular sequence, she reports how Coetzee commands her to give into the simulation: "'Empty your mind!' he hissed at me. 'Feel through the music!'" (69) The medium of music could be equated with the medium of the text transferring literary artfulness, Coetzee's primary mode of communication: Feel through the text! Accept the simulation presented to you and give in to it, then you will feel the underlying "history of feelings" of J.M. Coetzee.

Julia and John, a literary representation of Coetzee's self, live out their conflict in front of the reader. Julia claims, that she "never forced John to expose himself." (65) But Coetzee might have flinched at the degree of self-disclosure attained in *Summertime*, just as he does when Julia in a melodramatic fashion throws a plate after him: "He hunched his shoulders and turned to me with a puzzled stare." (71) Elizabeth Costello remarks on the puzzled stare of Franz Kafka:

> [...] Kafka saw both himself and Red Peter as hybrids, as monstrous thinking devices mounted inexplicably on suffering animal bodies. The stare that we meet in all the surviving photographs of Kafka is a stare of pure surprise: surprise, astonishment, alarm. Of all men Kafka is the most insecure in his humanity. (EC 75)

This quote encapsulates all three tendencies on Coetzee's self-representation: as animal, as human and as automaton. In *Summertime* Coetzee discovers the Nietzschean all-too-human in himself. Thus I claim that in *Summertime* Coetzee as an author has finally discovered a literary avenue that allows him to take himself out of himself.

### 5.7.2 The Empathy Effect in *Summertime*

The result is what I call the *empathy effect*,[193] a result of Coetzee's use of the sympathetic imagination: probing into the minds of his characters, taking the reader on a

[193] See section 1.7.

journey into foreign territory, the mind of an other. Obviously Coetzee draws on previous literary traditions, and other authors have delivered similarly compelling accounts of their protagonists' minds, one might even claim this to be one of the trademarks of modern literature. But Coetzee's prose style, his management of literary conventions, and his playful approach to existing genres make his work unique and exemplary. His concept of the sympathetic imagination, admittedly not expressed fully (yet) in his essayistic oeuvre, is a milestone and key to understanding how he manipulates his readers into following his path into the minds of his protagonists. Even more compelling is how Coetzee's imagination doubles up on the author himself in his latest works. Any serious consideration of autobiography today will have to discuss Coetzee's innovative style of self-reflection. As for Coetzee scholars, closely examining Coetzee's sympathetic imagination will prove very helpful and enlightening. Admittedly, not every reader will experience the empathy effect in their encounter with Coetzee's works, but all those who are drawn in by his fictions will most likely gain a fresh perspective in their gaze at the other. Coetzee's application of the sympathetic imagination and embodiment includes a utopian moment in proposing an intersubjective route of encountering the other. On a practical level, Coetzee's inherent idealism aims at an improvement of social conditions of living together. To Mr Vincent's question what might have been utopian enough for John, Sophie replies: "The closing down of the mines. The ploughing under of the vineyards. The disbanding of the armed forces. The abolition of the automobile. Universal vegetarianism. Poetry in the streets. That sort of thing." (230)

# 6. Evolution of the Sympathetic Imagination

J.M. Coetzee's fictions demonstrate both how the author applies his sympathetic imagination in creating fictional characters or alter egos, who in turn illustrate either the failure or the application of their sympathetic imagination, and how the text guides the reader's sympathetic imagination, resulting in enhanced empathy. The introduction has provided a neuroscientific theoretical framework that brings together the sympathetic imagination and empathy, linked to each other through the neurological mechanism of mirror neurons. Together, these theoretical reflections have constituted an empathetic lens for my close readings of Coetzee's novels, presented in chapters two to five, which focus either on the presentation of characters to the reader or on the interactions of the characters (with the reader as observer). These readings take their cue from the preliminary theoretical reflections,

though it has proved difficult to commensurate the methodological jargon of neuroscientific and literary discourse. While the neuroscientific approach forms the platform for my analysis, the close readings of the individual texts extend the methodology into the literary domain, shifting the focus to character constellations and character presentation. Consequently, the close readings constitute an act of my own sympathetic imagination that I have shared with the readers of this study. The neuroscientific research on mirror neurons has decisively shaped my approach, focussing the lens of my close readings on aspects relevant for a discussion of empathy and of the sympathetic imagination. The variations of how the sympathetic imagination is staged and enacted reveal an evolution of the concept (in the sense of a cultural evolution as proposed by Tomasello; see section 1.5.4.3). This development is not necessarily progressive and surely not hierarchical, as all variations importantly contribute to the refinement of the reader's sympathetic imagination and the enhancement of his empathetic sensibilities. In the close readings I have attempted to show how the literary representations discussed could be thought to cause the activation of complex patterns of mirror neurons in response to the narrative, which in turn create the neurological basis for our empathy to become active.

The chapter structure and grouping of the novels in this study reflects different phases of how the sympathetic imagination is staged in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee. The largely chronological order of the close readings was intended to test out whether a progressive development takes place over the course of Coetzee's oeuvre. This has proved true only insofar as the autobiographical fictions represent a particularly complex and daunting application of an author's sympathetic imagination to himself.

The (un)sympathetic imagination of the monolithic characters discussed in the second chapter demonstrates how either the sympathetic imagination of the characters fails or how their acts of the sympathetic imagination can be stalled. At the same time the isolated selves of Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee and Magda challenge the reader's sympathetic imagination to reach out to them. The first person present tense narration represents an ideal vehicle for this task, as it takes us out of ourselves and confronts us with co-inhabiting the idiosyncratic views of the main characters.

*Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) represent a first shift in how the sympathetic imagination is enacted. Both the Magistrate and Michael K prominently strain to apply their sympathetic imagination, but are only partially successful. In the case of the Magistrate, his efforts are frustrated (and promoted) by the power games he is drawn into with Colonel Joll. Michael K, on the other hand, occupies a position of marginality

and non-power, disallowing him any claims on others (as the Magistrate claims the barbarian girl). Coetzee's narrative of the Magistrate focuses on his personal development, showing how he continuously becomes more open to engaging with others in the spirit of a sympathetic imagination. The first person present tense narrative again draws us in and aligns us closely with Magistrate. In *Life & Times of Michael K* the third person past tense narration shifts the position of the reader to that of a more neutral observer. While the Magistrate progressively develops his sympathetic imagination, Michael K challenges the reader to position himself and his empathetic faculties in relation to the character and the others he encounters. Both novels share the opening up to social context and the introduction of significant others which challenge either the reader's and/or the character's sympathetic imagination, in the first case with a character reaching out to others while in the second case the character is on the retreat from all social relations.

The novels discussed in the third chapter share in common the themes of authorial responsibility and the themes of loss and grief. Susan Barton, Elizabeth Curren and Fyodor Dostoevsky all grieve over lost children. In *Foe*, the lost daughter of Susan Barton (a theme derived from Defoe's *Roxanna*) forms the motivational backbone of Susan Barton's travels, but feature less prominently in the course of the narrative than her encounter with Friday. This encounter with the other, narrated by Barton in first person past tense narration, constitutes the epicentre of the entire narrative, just as Friday's untold story lies at the heart of the story. Susan Barton's attempts to empathetically engage with Friday all fail (yet we as readers may learn from these failures).

The epistolary narrative of Elizabeth Curren and the narrative featuring Dostoevsky represent a significant shift in the staging of the sympathetic imagination. The more personal tone (reflecting events in J.M. Coetzee's own life) together with a preoccupation with death – Dostoevsky mourns, as Curren premeditates her own impending death – opens up a new arena for the sympathetic imagination, unleashing some of its potential that so far remained hidden. More than all previous characters, these two draw us into their inner conflicts as we accompany them on their struggle for salvation. The first person past tense narration of Elizabeth Curren has a similar effect as in Coetzee's first two novels, inviting the reader to partake fully in the presented narrative perspective, only now we witness how Elizabeth Curren opens up and allows her sympathetic imagination to flow more freely, especially to those who do not immediately elicit her sympathy. Like Curren, Dostoevsky, whose story is related in third person past tense, attempts to apply his sympathetic imagination, though in his case it is directed mainly towards his deceased stepson Pavel (prompting him to face the

ultimate challenge of imagining death; a task also undertaken by Curren). In the sense of a character study, these two novels offer the most intimate view at processes of the sympathetic imagination and the empathy aroused by it. Both narratives represent early examples of a fictionalized acting out and working through personal grief, continued later in the autobiographical fictions. And more than all other novels the acts of perspective-taking undertaken by Curren and Dostoevsky blur the lines between "I" and "You" and "He", allowing their empathy to reach out beyond their selves.

*Disgrace* provides the most elaborate staging of the sympathetic imagination in Coetzee's oeuvre. The novel tells the complicated story of David Lurie's inner development. While some have questioned the sincerity of his change, few have doubted that change has taken place within David Lurie. We follow Lurie at the safe distance of third person past tense narration, from his life as a sexual predator with little empathy to a life empathetically spent with abject dogs. Coetzee's presentation is very straightforward and the trajectory of Lurie's development corresponds with how well he applies his sympathetic imagination and how well he is able to empathize with others. While *Slow Man* echoes many themes of *Disgrace*, it does not as strongly reflect on the sympathetic imagination and empathetic sensibility of the protagonist. As my brief discussion of the encounter of Paul Rayment and the blind Marianna shows, the plot is more contrived and less likely to draw the reader in.

The autobiographical fictions finally represent a culmination point of how Coetzee stages the sympathetic imagination in his novels. The self-reflexive character of the texts allows for an unprecedented intimacy with a concomitant self-distancing that allows Coetzee's narrative empathy to be redirected at the author himself.

## 6.1 Coetzee's Autobiographical Fictions: Acting Out and Working Through Trauma (Dominic LaCapra)

While *Boyhood* and *Youth* were primarily acting out former selves, *Summertime* contains a stronger notion of working through a former self. In his seminal 2001 study *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra discusses mainly how the holocaust is remembered and how the resulting traumatization is processed, but his findings can easily be applied to any historical setting of long-term collective traumatization (as in South Africa under apartheid). Discussing the status of testimonies as either fiction or memoir, LaCapra speaks of an "emerging hybridized genre: the faux mémoire." (LaCapra 2001: 34) In relation to the Shoah testimonial of Laub, LaCapra discerns:

> What she relives of the past, as if it were happening now in the present, may, to a greater or lesser extent, be (or not be) an accurate enactment, reconstruction, or representation of what actually occurred in the past. *It may involve distortion, disguise, and other permutations relating to processes of imaginative transformation and narrative shaping, as well as perhaps repression, denial, dissociation, and foreclosure.* But these issues have a bearing only on certain aspects of her account and could not invalidate it in its entirety. (LaCapra 2001:88-89; emphasis added)

Though Coetzee at no point claims accuracy for his autobiographical fictions, it involves similar mechanisms of distortion, disguise, and permutations in the narrative presentation. Yet, in spite of all concealment, these fictions confront us (and the author) with a detailed account of how a boy suffers both collective and individual traumatization, how the youth suffers from its personal consequences, and ultimately how the late John Coetzee was perceived by others. I take the autobiographical fictions altogether to resemble a process of what LaCapra terms "acting out and working through":

> Moreover, especially in an ethical sense, working through does not mean avoidance, harmonization, simply forgetting the past, or submerging oneself in the present. It means coming to terms with the trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognize why it may be necessary and even in certain respects desirable or at least compelling. (The latter is especially the case with respect to a fidelity to trauma and its victims, that there is something in the repetition of the past – say, in a nightmare – that amounts to dedication of fidelity to lost loved ones and is a kind of memorial that is not based on suppression or oblivion.)
> In any case certain wounds, both personal and historical, cannot simply heal without leaving scars or residues in the present; there may even be a sense in which they have to remain as open wounds even if one strives to counteract their tendency to swallow all of existence and incapacitate one as an agent of the present. (LaCapra 2001: 144)

Remember the young man John conceiving South Africa as "a wound within him." (Y 116; see also above p. 253)[194] *Youth* demonstrates precisely how one can be incapacitated as an agent of the present through past traumatization: "The result is a paralyzing kind of all-or-nothing logic in which one is in a double bind: either totalization and the closure you resist, or acting out the repetition compulsion, with almost no other possibilities." According to LaCapra, this "constricted frame of reference" can result in "a politics of utopian hope in the form of indefinite deferral of institutional change or even of substantive recommendations." (LaCapra 2001: 145) The indefinite deferral of change is solidified in *Summertime* by the simulated death of the author. But the seemingly primarily personal negotiations of Coetzee in his autobiographical fictions have larger implications, in line with LaCapra's assessment of the process of working through trauma:

> [I]t may be possible, and in some sense it has to be possible, if you believe in anything like a viable democratic politics, to enable and try to bring about processes of working through that are not simply therapeutic for the individual but have political and ethical implications. (LaCapra 2001: 152)

[194] See also section 5.5.3 Remembering South Africa – Echoes from *Boyhood*

In the light of my larger argument regarding the sympathetic imagination, I hold these ethical implications to be a hospitable acknowledgement of the others already contained in ourselves and the others we encounter – as LaCapra notes: "Acting out and working through, in this sense, constitute a distinction, in that one may never be totally separate from the other, and the two may always mark or be implicated in each other." (LaCapra 2001: 150)

Coetzee's autobiographical fictions constitute an acting out and working through of traumas experienced by former selves. It is a proxy simulation allowing a more mature reappraisal, with the unflinchingness that is a landmark of Coetzee's writing. By applying his sympathetic imagination to his former selves, he applies what has been exercised in all his previous fictions and achieves an empathetic engagement through the fictionalized self-reflection. For the reader, Coetzee's acting out and working through complements the lessons on the sympathetic imagination received in reading his previous novels; while these taught the reader how to direct his sympathetic imagination towards others in a mode of empathetic engagement, the autobiographical fictions now teach us how to apply the sympathetic imagination to ourselves, complementing and refining our potential for an empathetic engagement. Finally, *Summertime* pretends to offer the closure LaCapra warns of, but instead of providing a totalization of his perspective engages in a polyphonic murmur emanating from fictional others that supposedly encountered him in the past. And while Coetzee has always shown great reluctance to reveal his personal self to the public, he has also repeatedly emphasized how all his writing bears an autobiographical strain:

> At this point in the notes, Coetzee breaks with the discussion of Schreiner to write: "Of course I am talking about myself. Whenever we talk about something else we are talking about ourselves." But he closes off this autobiographical moment just as quickly, claiming that it is not in his interest to pursue this line of thought: "But I choose not to reflect on it, turn myself back to look upon it (like Orpheus). Life is too short. (The meaning of the Orpheus story: you kill your inspiration by turning back to look at it.)" (Kelly 2011: 143)

Following this logic, having looked back at himself too much should have killed Coetzee's inspiration; and *Summertime* did give many readers a feeling of closure, of a last book. But in 2013 the publication of *The Childhood of Jesus* marks a new departure in the writing of J.M. Coetzee.

## 6.2 Coetzeean Utopias: *The Childhood of Jesus* and Beyond

*Imagine all the people, sharing all the world.* (John Lennon, *Imagine*, 1971)

In *The Childhood of Jesus* (2012) Coetzee introduces us to a new world, where people speak Spanish and where the displaced are welcome and taken care of: "a quasi-socialist state

in which conformity, mediocrity and anonymity are both the norm and the highest values." (Oates 2013) And yet, in spite of the goodwill displayed by the people of Novilla, the life offered to Simón and David seems to lack something, the interactions and encounters appear "bloodless" (CJ 30) and pale – at least to Simón (his co-workers are "strangely incurious," CJ 22). Everything is provided for, and the bureaucratic procedures they undergo are tolerably efficient. As readers we are left to wonder what might be at odds in this brave new world. A discussion between Simón and Ana from Social Welfare about appetites and desires gives a first hint, when they argue about moderation and 'natural' impulses (CJ31f) – we might think of Lurie's insistence on acting on his impulses. This discussion feeds into one main theme of the novel, namely "How one is to live." (CJ 54) The appearance of Inés offers a second clue, as she and her brothers belong to an apparently aristocratic upper class that is not required to work but instead spends their time with leisure (and freely pursuing desires). In a reversal of the theme of the lost child,[195] Simón is searching for David's mother, and wilfully decides that the young woman Inés (from the upper class, introduced playing tennis at La Residencia, CJ 68) shall be the surrogate mother for David. When young David, supposedly the Jesus figure alluded to in the title, is required to go to school and does not fare well there due to his individualistic approach to things and questioning of all authority – a mixture of autonomy and stubbornness, this non-compliance leads to the state authorities recommending him to go to a special school at Arena Puntes.[196] The boy goes there but on his return reports counterfactual information about barbed-wire fences and bad treatment, refusing to go there again. The mother figure Inés concurs with his refusal and urges Simón to take them away from the city to escape the state-imposed measures for the boy's education. Simón complies, and together the three of them drive off north. Coetzee in this novel illustrates the conflict between communal compliance (the good of all) and individual dissent (the good of one), showing how the goodwill of a community might bring along constraints for the individual: "Is he [Simón] insisting on the primacy of the personal (desire, love) over the universal (goodwill, benevolence)?" (CJ 57)[197] As readers we witness Simón growing accustomed to a

[195] As expressed previously in *Foe*, *Age of Iron*, and *The Master of Petersburg*. Many tropes from previous novels reappear in *The Childhood of Jesus*, to be explored in forthcoming studies.

[196] Punta Arenas is a city in the far South of Chile (and in Peru); while J.C. Oates was reminded of a Southern European setting (Oates 2013), for me the use of Spanish and the idea of a fresh start pointed rather to South America. Obviously Coetzee has created yet another allegorical setting without specific pointers to any actual locality.

[197] Joyce Carol Oates tentatively relates *The Childhood of Jesus* to Buddhist enlightenment and Christian salvation:

> For a while I speculated that "The Childhood of Jesus" might be a novel of ideas in which the stillness of the Buddhist vision of enlightenment and the striving of Christian salvation are contrasted: the one essentially cyclical, the other "progressive"; the goal of one the annihilation of

life of goodwill, even urging young David to quit "living in a private world" of his own (CJ 187); David has a vivid imagination, creating his own private language, comprehending numbers in his own individual way, claiming he can read minds. Joyce Carol Oates comments:

> At times David seems emotionally disturbed, possibly autistic or mildly schizophrenic; he has no friends at school and his teacher finds him essentially unteachable, since he is a disruptive presence in the classroom. Yet his immature behavior might be a consequence of adult overindulgence. He is unusually bright at times, then again obstinate, exasperating. (Oates 2013)

David and Simón represent the "old way of thinking" with its "endless dissatisfaction" (CJ 63), which has in this new world been replaced by general goodwill and benevolence for "the price of forgetting" (CJ 60). In political terms this can be linked to John Rawl's thought experiment with the "veil of ignorance", where all participants decide on what terms to live ignorant of their position in the society to be created (Rawls 1999: 118); only here the individuals actually forget their past in order to make a fresh start: "We all started from nowhere, from nothing." (CJ 103) And: "None of us has a past. We start anew here." (CJ 97) As for enactments of the sympathetic imagination and empathy, this novel has little offer. Ultimately, the ending of *The Childhood of Jesus* – the search for a new beginning elsewhere – echoes the scepticism prominent in all utopian thoughts offered in Coetzee's oeuvre, but also provides an optimistic glimpse for a brighter future where love and goodwill are equally value.

All of Coetzee's fictions contain a nucleus of optimistic alternative, especially when we imagine the characters properly employing their sympathetic imagination and empathetically engaging with the others they encounter. Jacobus Coetzee might have befriended the Hottentots he encountered and established a mutual relation of trust, if not for the historical colonial constraints marking his attitude towards them: "How do I know that Johannes Plaatje, or even Adonis, not to speak of the Hottentot dead, was not an immense world of delight closed off to my senses? May I not have killed something of inestimable value?" (DL 106) Likewise, Eugene Dawn might have developed sympathy for the people of Vietnam, recommending a less atrocious course of action in his report: "Beyond courage there is the humble heart, the quiet garden into which we may escape from the cycles of time. I am

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> the individual personality in a sort of universal void, and the goal of the other the "salvation" of a distinctly individual personality and its guarantee of everlasting life and reunion with loved ones in heaven. More plausibly, it seemed likely that "The Childhood of Jesus" is a Kafka-inspired parable of the quest for meaning itself: for reasons to endure when (secular) life lacks passion and purpose. (Oates 2013)

neat and polite, but I am the man of the future paradise." (DL 27) While these utopian projections are not featured prominently in the narratives themselves, they are recognizable for the reader. Magda might have established the kind of peaceful co-existence with Hendrik and Anna, if not for the burden of life-long segregation: "Why will no one speak to me in the true language of the heart? The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled!" (HOC 133) Michael K offers an ambivalent vision, characterized largely by a retreat from society, ultimately resulting in his final vision of him and an old man living on the water retrieved from a well with a teaspoon. The Magistrate actually manages to resist and repel the rule of empire, creating a tabula rasa on which the construction of a new community at least seems imaginable. Cruso in *Foe* proposes his credo: "We eat, we live, we die." (FOE 32) Cruso continues: "On the island there is no law except the law that we shall work for our bread, which is a commandment. [...] Laws are made for one purpose only, [...] to hold us in check when our desires grow immoderate. As long as our desires are moderate we have no need of laws." (FOE 36) Susan Barton's relation to Friday can hardly be viewed in an optimistic light, although the roar issuing from Friday's mouth in the final section has been read as bringing a new awareness to the world (Post 1989: 152f; see also above p. 138f.). Elizabeth Curren can be read as a figure of transformation, albeit on an individual basis; she manages to overcome her deeply ingrained attitudes of segregation and her new consciousness brings her close to Vercueil. The character Dostoevsky and the narrative he is embedded in offers little utopian potential, especially when considering the dark and bitter ending. This bitterness continues throughout the autobiographical fictions, contrasted by the essay fictions *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, which all offer glimpses of a more positive engagement with others. The pessimist strain in Coetzee's fiction culminates in the idea of digging a hole for humanity to vanish in (first expressed by the Magistrate, WFB 26, later picked up by Michael K, LTMK 95). In *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), Senõr C comments on La Boétie, a French contemporary of Montaigne, and his attack on political tyranny: "The alternatives are not placid servitude on the one hand and revolt against servitude on the other. There is a third way, chosen by thousands and millions of people every day. It is the way of quietism, of willed obscurity, of inner emigration." (DOA 12) This is the individual escape route; alternatively we might imagine the millions of people joining together to create a new fourth way to proceed into the future together. Here, a comment by Senõr C in *Diary of a Bad Year* is illuminating:

> If, despite the evidence of our senses, we accept the premise that we or our forebears created the state, then we must also accept its entailment: that we or our forebears could have created the state in some other form, if we had chosen; perhaps, too, that we could change it if we collectively so decided. But the fact is that, even collectively, those who are "under" the state, who "belong to" the state, will find it very hard indeed to change its form; they – we – are certainly powerless to abolish it. (DOA 3)

In a similar vein Senõr C muses on the French people after end of German occupation:

> Did anyone, in 1944, say to the French populace: Consider: the retreat of our German overlords means that for a brief moment we are ruled by no one. Do we want to end that moment, or do we perhaps want to perpetuate it – to become the first people in modern times to roll back the state? Let us, as French people, use our new and sudden freedom to debate the question without restraint. Perhaps some poet spoke the words; but if he did his voice must at once have been silenced by the armed gangs, who in this case and in all cases have more in common with each other than with the people. (DOA 7)

The indefinite deferral of change, which LaCapra qualified as one aspect of traumatization, can be noted in Coetzee's self-searching autobiographical fictions, while *The Childhood of Jesus* finally seems to suggest the potential of a far-reaching institutional change towards an ethics of care, yet still with some doubts about the price we as individuals might have to pay for such a shared future. If considering how political transformation might be achieved, Coetzee obviously refuses to propose a specific course of action, as (fictional) former colleague Sophie de Noel reveals in her assessment:

> He was not a militant. His politics were too idealistic, too Utopian for that. In fact he was not political at all. He looked down on politics. […] He thought that politics brought out the worst in people. It brought out the worst in people and also brought to the surface the worst types in society. (ST 228)

In a similar vein she proposes Coetzee to refuse to subscribe to any course of action involving violence: "Nothing is worth fighting for because fighting only prolongs the cycle of aggression and retaliation." (ST 231) But what could be the alternative? Sophie continues:

> He looked forward to the day when politics and the state would wither away. I would call that Utopian. On the other hand, he did not invest a great deal of himself in these Utopian longings. He was too much of a Calvinist for that. (ST 229)

Sophie concludes: "What his position boiled down to, I said, was old-fashioned Romantic primitivism." (ST 231)

Shameen Black discusses contemporary fiction (including among others Coetzee's) that "open paths for dialogue, debate, and mediation across socially defined borders," claiming that "[s]uch imaginative projection struggles toward [an] utopian form of communication." (Black 2010:251) Coetzee's "remolding of the self" (Black 2010:252) in his autobiographical fictions represents the final stage of refining the literary application of his sympathetic imagination and the consequent enhancement of his empathetic sensibilities. In my view, Coetzee's fictions all strive for a utopian form of communication, while at the same

time revealing the limitations and restrictions imposed on the individual by history and social classification. Black goes on: "In seeking to represent the lives of others across social borders, the novels I explore envision such expansive forms of public cultures. Although novels cannot bring about new and enduring solidarity by themselves, they may still work to enlarge their readers' horizons of possibility." (Black 2010:253) He argues for the novel as a privileged site for the renegotiation of social discourses:

> In light of this persistent debate about the proper scope for ethical concern, an art form like the novel offers a powerful accommodation between the rational imperative to imagine the lives of others and the emotional need to consider them within intimate communities of passionate commitment. (Black 2010:254)

It is exactly this intimacy and passion that Simon is missing in the new world depicted in *The Childhood of Jesus*.

My reading of Coetzee's fiction with an empathetic lens and a focus on the staging of the sympathetic imagination has followed an impulse expressed by Moses Valdez:

> If Coetzee's fiction is in the main antipastoral and dystopian, then isn't our task as critics (following his own example) to read dialectically, to subvert the dominant, to discover in his work the utopian possibility, the pastoral impulse which cannot be written directly: "Our craft," he says, "is all in reading the other: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities." (Moses 1994:54; quote from Commitment 194/DP 12; White Writing, 81)

In analysing how the sympathetic imagination of the character's, of the reader, and of the author are staged and activated, in some cases developing progressively in other cases remaining in stagnation, this study has attempted to show the evident efforts of empathetically engaging with alterity as proposed by Adorno. In combination with the ratchet effect proposed by Tomasello as enabling a cumulative cultural evolution of modern man (Tomasello 1999: 5), this occasions an utopian potential in the propagation and dissemination of Coetzee's (Costello's) concept of the sympathetic imagination. While the ideas inherent in the concept surely date back a long time, there are some indicators that allow me to propose that presently we are experiencing a surge in empathetic potential that might allow a stabilization of the innovation of our empathetic capabilities through cultural heritage (again in compliance with Tomasello's ideas, 1999: 5-6). Tomasello brilliantly argues that empathy was made possible through new forms of cultural learning: 1) learning by imitation 2) learning by instruction 3) learning by cooperation. (Tomasello 1999: 5) The development of linguistic representation allowed humans to immensely expand the scope of their ideational contexts. (Tomasello 1999: 8-9) In our present time, literature offers the most complex linguistic representations of the minds of others, made available to us in its most complex form in the novel. I therefore agree with Black's assessment of the novel as a privileged site for the renegotiation of our social

contexts and our ideas of community. Unfortunately, the privilege comes with a double bind; for, being privileged, the novel is today the playground for the ideas of intellectual elites that largely fails to reach out to the multitude of people, instead establishing a rather small circle of initiated readers. This applies especially to authors as Coetzee, who align themselves with a long tradition of ideas, making it hard for some to gain access to the intricate fictions provided by him; *The Childhood of Jesus* marks a shift in this regard through its simplified language and syntax and less high-brow references to intellectual traditions. And, by creating links to other discourses, the group of potential readers expands – most obviously religious discourse has reacted strongly to this new novel. This study has established one such link to the discourse of neurosciences in relation to empathy. I hope to have shown the complexity of Coetzee's staging of the sympathetic imagination, with both its limitations and its enormous potential. As Geoffrey Baker states, "Coetzee refuses to deliver into his readers' hands and heart a single-minded, unproblematized strategy for social betterment." (Baker 2005: 43) But Coetzee urges us to open our minds and hearts to others, and in *Summertime* he lets Sophie de Noel express a possible vision of a future:

> He longed for the day when everyone in South Africa would call themselves nothing, neither African nor European nor white nor black nor anything else, when family histories would have become so tangled and intermixed that people would be ethically indistinguishable, that is to say –I utter the tainted word again – Coloured. He called that the Brazilian future. He approved of Brazil and the Brazilians. He had of course never been to Brazil. (ST 232f)

Finally, last words from *The Childhood of Jesus*. The boy David asks Simón, "[W]hy are we here?" Simón answers: "We are are here for the same reason everyone else is. We have been given a chance to live and we have accepted that chance. It is a great thing, to live. It is the greatest of all." (CJ 17)

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Hilmar Heister

**Erklärung zu meiner Dissertation mit dem Titel:**
**„The Sympathetic Imagination in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee**
**– Empathy and Mirror Neurons in Literature"**

Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren,

hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich die beigefügte Dissertation selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel genutzt habe. Alle wörtlich oder inhaltlich übernommenen Stellen habe ich als solche gekennzeichnet.

Ich versichere außerdem, dass ich die beigefügte Dissertation nur in diesem und keinem anderen Promotionsverfahren eingereicht habe und, dass diesem Promotionsverfahren keine sonstigen Promotionsverfahren vorausgegangen sind.

Ich versichere hiermit, dass ich die dem angestrebten Verfahren zugrunde liegende Promotionsordnung zur Kenntnis genommen habe.

Berlin, 05.10.2014
Ort, Datum

Unterschrift